

|Book Symposium|



# Suffering and pictures of anthropological inquiry

## A response to comments on *Life in debt*

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*Life in debt* emerged out of my long-term relationship with an ethnographic site. If the book is concerned with tracing *how* the self is enmeshed in relationships and *how* one responds to others in a world, then it also takes those concerns as integral to the writing itself. Invited by HAU's Book Symposium, the wonderful scholars assembled here have responded in diverse ways to the ethnography's guiding themes as well as the manners by which I relate to them in my writing. In their generous and thought-provoking comments, the participants too have offered a range of different impulses and styles that at once respond to the book and to their pictures of anthropology as a field of inquiry. In my response, I move between these registers, in the hope of more explicitly drawing out my own commitments with regard to anthropological modes of inquiry and senses of responsibility.

Let me first turn to the issue of scale. As I was drawn into a range of relationships in La Pincoya, I simultaneously began to appreciate how an array of state institutions and market forces were layered in everyday life. Eligibility requirements for poverty programs, the irregularity of wages and work, circulations of antidepressants provided for by national mental health programs, and contests over how experiences of torture and exile are authorized all permeate relationships of kinship, friendship, and neighborliness. My task, as I saw it, was to engage these institutions and forces as they wove into a diversity of relational modes within the local itself. My ethnographic writing is an expression of this sensibility, which Anne Allison so nicely phrases as a "collage of scalar effects" or Veena Das perceives as the "shift in scale" in order to understand conditions by which the "critical moment" emerges.

Michael Jackson moves this discussion in a different direction when he asks: "how *completely* we can explain human situations and experiences by referring to state policies and programs, traumatic historical events, global political economies, and discursive regimes?" Here, I take Jackson as asking: In what way is indebtedness embedded in the human condition? Is the social the ground of all being? In what ways is explanation itself tied to the kinds of theory we elaborate? These are

daunting and necessarily open questions. For, while we may agree that the social is not the ground of all being, I myself have not found an anthropological way to have access to being other than in relation to the social. To take Jackson's concern further, I might ask if we have access to the human independent of the forms of life in which the human becomes available. In other words, while philosophical thought may provide reflections on pure being, it has been difficult for me to see how I might anthropologically arrive at a notion of being independent of forms of life. Within anthropological thought, then, we might ask how our explanations of the social are enmeshed with the kinds of theory we are elaborating. In this vein, I can say that the logics and actualizations of state programs and financial institutions and the concrete ways they emerge in the lives of the poor were crucial aspects of the social that impelled my own theorizations of the moral. How might we attend to the actual materialities of the lives of the poor and engage the ways in which the moral is interwoven with these materialities? Before I delve into related questions posed by the participants, I want to first turn to Tobias Kelly's discussion on the place of suffering in anthropological thought.

In framing his commentary, Tobias Kelly offers a critical view of anthropological work that attends to violence and suffering, what he, drawing from Neil Thin (2009), calls "a miserabilist tradition." Although anthropological thought with regard to suffering has deep genealogies (see, for example, Max Weber's writings on theodicy), and is wide-ranging and diverse, Kelly surprisingly takes the whole of this work to offer seemingly naïve descriptions of horror and misery, "Book after book has described in great ethnographic detail the multiple ways that humans can be horrible to other humans." He rhetorically asks, "At what point does an ethnography of suffering turn into a voyeuristic quasi-pornography? What is the point of yet another description of the capacity of humans to feel pain and suffer?" Kelly then takes my book as an exception to this "tradition," since "the overall impression that the reader takes away is not one of despair, but hope," although a hope in which the desires for care may run up against limits.<sup>1</sup>

I want to elaborate a few concerns with this appraisal and the placement of my book in relation to it. First, in what way might we speak of an "ethnography of suffering"? Here, the "of" acts to create a sense that there are given agreements as to what might or might not fall under "suffering." Yet, it is precisely this givenness of agreements that so much anthropological work has sought to problematize. I might ask Kelly what falls under his notion of "suffering." From my reading, suffering encompasses: "the capacity of humans to feel pain," "how bad life can be," "misery," and "negative vices, such as betrayal and hypocrisy." Yet, these statements seem to reinstate aspects of an imaginary of a liberal subject, which Kelly has so thoughtfully and critically engaged in his own work (Kelly 2011). In

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1. It is interesting to note here how the photo on the front cover is received in dreadful terms—"grey and dreary sky." Other readers have asked me if the cover photo is a photo taken during the last scene of the book, a scene of tranquility that emerges as if from nowhere: a sunny, breezy afternoon shared with others. Indeed, it is, and I was very much hoping that readers might make that connection, but I left it up to them.
  2. See Nelson Goodman's (1961) "About," where he delineates not only the inconsistencies in our ordinary usage of "about," but also shows under what conditions a statement might be *absolutely about* a given object.

this imaginary, suffering is a (human) capacity to feel pain which is equated with or interchangeable with misery; in which boundaries between cruelty and indifference and care and generosity are secure; and in which the “suffering subject” could be read along stable axes of good and evil. Yet, far more than “simply providing descriptions of harsh lives,” anthropological attention to suffering has provided some of the most thoughtful work on the difficulty of a universally recognizable human (Asad 2003; Kleinman et al. 1997; Perdigon 2010). This work has powerfully shown how the very imagination of the self-sovereign liberal subject may actually sustain the differential distributions of harm and lethalties, and has elucidated how those harms and lethalties may, in fact, be entirely eclipsed by this subject (Biehl and Eskerod 2005; Povinelli 2006; Stevenson 2012).

I want to pause here and reflect more closely on one of Kelly’s characterizations of this work: “[a] description of the capacity of humans to feel pain and suffer.” We might ask if indeed this anthropological work is simply describing a capacity of humans to feel pain. For, if we consider the bodily aspects of being human that are shared with other animals, we can agree at least on that basis that humans have a *capacity* to feel pain. This discussion is clearly missing the point: anthropological thought attentive to suffering is neither simply concerned with a capacity to feel pain, nor even an ignorance to pain or an incapacity to imagine another’s pain. Rather, anthropologists have sought to elaborate problems such as how pain gains expression in language and the stakes in the *acknowledgement* of pain: what is at stake when that acknowledgment is withheld? This question can be at once political and moral. Furthermore, I might ask if Kelly’s characterization contains any theorization of time. For, in his account, there is no appreciation of how the problem of acknowledgement and the problem of language in relation to pain has opened our thought to multiple durations. Even trauma theory—which anthropologists attentive to the idea of suffering have extensively and critically engaged and definitively challenged as *the* explanatory model for suffering—has a specific conceptualization of time.

Perhaps we might more fully appreciate the idea that suffering contains a notion of *life* (Das 2007). For, the caricature of humans being horrible to other humans eclipses the ways in which the very fabric of life may be frayed by violence and the work of time in reweaving life again: the very modes of relatedness that emerge from and through suffering. In this regard, I find it curious that Kelly’s sensibility shifts as he comments on my book. Rather than simply discuss “people” or “humans,” he is now confronted with concrete *relationships*, through which he comes to see that “it is not that jealousy and cruelty do not exist, but rather they exist alongside and are caught up with generosity.” So, in engaging an actual social world, the secure boundaries and the stable axes upon which Kelly’s notion of “suffering” seem to rest themselves start to come undone.

How might we consider Kelly’s claim that attending to suffering may turn into “quasi-voyeuristic pornography”? Indeed, the deep appreciation that suffering can be appropriated into the spectacular not only has fostered extensive thought on ethics and responsibility in anthropology but has also placed great demands on ethnographic writing (see Kleinman and Kleinman 1997). What might be at stake in advancing an investigation into versions of “the good” or “the positive” rather than attend to suffering? Here lie my deepest concerns: defining the good already requires a commitment to some set of transcendent values of “the good,” values

available only if we narrowly imagine morality as an obligation to codified rules. Disregarding experiences of suffering in the name of “the good” may make us incapable of acknowledging the fact that states and markets actually do inflict harm on populations and communities, and may create a slippery slope in which some experiences of suffering are more legitimate or authentic than others (see Kleinman 2000; Kleinman 2010). To sense how dangerous this proposition might be, we might simply recall how, under the Pinochet dictatorship, the harshest economic reforms were implemented under the banner of “healing”; and that only fourteen years *after* the handover to the coalition of democratic parties did the Chilean state officially acknowledge the Pinochet regime’s pervasive use of torture. We might also consider how eligibility requirements for extreme poverty parse up those in need while obviating a serious discussion on the ways in which economic precariousness has become institutionalized.

Rather than single out *Life in debt* as exceptional in relation to a miserabilist tradition, I would insist that this ethnography engages anthropological literatures that have been awake to violence and to the experiences of suffering. Clearly, these literatures implicate differences in theoretical impulses, methodologies, as well as settings. Tracing such differences, Veena Das asks how I might see my work “as similar to or different from the approach taken by Povinelli and others who think of neoliberalism and late liberalism primarily through the notion of abandonment”, while Anne Allison asks “how particular is the condition of ‘life in debt’ to neoliberal Chile?”

In her acute reading of Elizabeth Povinelli’s *Economies of abandonment* alongside *Life in debt*, Das asks if “what is called poverty and ordinary suffering is one thing in worlds described by Han and quite another thing in the contexts in which Povinelli is located? Or, are there different theoretical impulses at work here that lead to very different kinds of ethnographic description?” This question is very difficult because poverty itself is so highly mutable in ethnographic description: that the comparisons across settings of what is called poverty (and “life in debt”) often turn into the comparison of different theoretical impulses. However, here I try to trace out some of my own commitments towards elaborating poverty anthropologically.

Let me begin with two different discussions of abandonment. In Povinelli’s account, the quasi-event in its dispersal in the everyday is an “agentless slow death” that implicates “the complexity of an entire system” (Povinelli 2011: 146). The “events of abandonment” are precisely these statistical aggregates and media spectacles that both steer away perception of those chronic “uneventful” lethalties as well as justify the withdrawal of welfare programs on the basis of the future anterior: the tense in which Indigenous communities are made to foster a neoliberal ethic, regardless of the distribution of death that this quest for the entrepreneurial spirit produces in the present.

In contrast, João Biehl has provided a powerful discussion of the zones of social abandonment resulting from Brazil’s neoliberal reforms. As formal institutions of social welfare vanish or become nonfunctional and as public health are “pharmaceuticalized,” urban poor families become “affectively politicized” (Biehl 2012: 246). Families take on the roles and functions of the state in terms of deciding whose lives are worth living and who can be subject to a social and biological death. In Biehl’s ethnography, the domestic is a scene of “encroachment

of medical commodities” and the space where the “dominant mode of subjectification at the service of medical science and capitalism” is integrally linked to the “declining value of blood ties” (ibid.: 245). Abandonment for Biehl is not a simple story of a withdrawing welfare state. Rather, it is generated not only through the economic pressures produced through these market forces, but also through the very ways in which discourses of market value and treatment adherence provide the very rationalities for disregarding and abandoning kin.

Despite significant differences in ethnographic description, abandonment in both accounts is elaborated as an effect of “market values” and as the outcome of an ethics in which prevailing definitions of “the good” hinge upon these values, which have encroached on, politicized, or have anchored within the local and the domestic, while also globally producing differential distributions of lethality. In contrast to these values, relational practices or an ethics of cosubstantiality manifest accountabilities and obligations to concrete others that, from Biehl’s vantage point, are today in decline, or from Povinelli’s vantage point, present alternative social projects that must endure their constant being-in-potential.

While raising compelling issues, both works invite further questions. First, we may ask how illness is dispersed over a range of relationships within the local, and how those very relationships may also create vulnerabilities and assert small cruelties that cannot be ascribed in any transparent manner to “market values.” In my ethnography, I engage that “continuous time in which quasi-events unfold in the family or between friends and neighbors” (Das) and “the tactics people deploy to share or absorb, divert or refuse the hardship of others” (Allison) as a way to expand our perceptive range on the subtleties of relationships and material pressures that may not be perceptible under a notion of abandonment. Second, we might consider the uniqueness of neighborhood ecologies and their relation to care-seeking as well as institutional and intimate forms of neglect. For instance, Das and Das (2006) examine the emergent nature of illness categories and the fluctuations of care and neglect in kinship relationships within a unique neighborhood ecology where medical markets respond to the irregularity of wages in the local. Finally, we may ask how different senses of vulnerability beyond the vulnerabilities of acute economic losses or demands emerge under forms of neoliberalism. For instance, in his work on targeted poverty programs in Malawi, Harry Englund has observed how simply replacing a liberal ethic of individual choice underlying targeted aid with “a notion of obligation as a matter of communal solidarity and ascribed statuses” completely misses the sense of vulnerability embodied by village headmen, who, in their role in distributing targeted aid, are exposed to the noxious feelings of envy and hatred within the local (Englund 2012: 293).

These observations invite further theorizing *through* ethnography. In just this spirit, Anne Allison encourages further thought on limits when she asks, “What happens when time runs out?” That is, are there limits to the material possibilities afforded by both networks within the local and financial institutions? We might rephrase this question in terms of Das’ remark on “falling out of the world”, and ask how that “falling out” might be thought next to a notion of abandonment. Das opens this question by asking if my account of silent kindness invites thought on a different figure of the neighbor than that of radical alterity: “the other who could also be me.” Before asking how *this* figure of the neighbor might specifically

inspire thought with regard to abandonment, let us take a recent discussion on the neighbor as “outsider.”<sup>3</sup> In his acute elaboration of the political theology of the neighbor, Bhigurapati Singh (2011) offers the notion of “agonistic intimacy” in which neighboring groups that are potentially hostile on one threshold are invited into shared “theological-moral aspirations” on another threshold. Singh lays out the coordinates for this figure of the neighbor through tracing the migration of a deity Tejaji genealogically and across neighboring groups. This “outsider deity” is inflected in Singh’s figure of the neighbor: “The concept of ‘the neighbor’ must allow for the potentiality of the outsider” (ibid.: 448).

The coordinates of the figure of the neighbor in *this* ethnographic description is not of “potentially hostile neighboring groups,” but rather the concrete neighbor within “the group,” for lack of a better expression. Here, the scenes are not ones of contest between groups and ritual moments of shared aspiration, but rather those critical moments within the scene of the domestic that every concrete neighbor could be vulnerable to. This comparison may lead us not only to “think more about how we are knitted to the world as well as *how some may fall out*,” but also to ask at what thresholds we might be considering those questions. For a moment, I want to linger on Heidegger’s notion of the communal other: “but only those whom one recognizes and responds to as such” in relation to “the other who *could* be me.” Das’ elaboration suggests that this “communal other” rests not on identity and difference, but rather on common conditions of *life*, in which life is both past and future. However, “the other who *could* also be me” also depends upon “responding as such.” It is interesting to note here how those sensibilities cultivated in the everyday expressed through small gestures, such as acts of silent kindness, not only knit life together but also demonstrate fragilities and vulnerabilities of that life. “Falling out” may be composed of a multiplicity of subtle forces that may wax and wane: not paying back a loan, avoiding one’s neighbors in everyday courtesies, testing or reaching limits with intimate kin.

Interestingly enough, as we follow this thought, we are brought back to the “collage of scalar effects” that Allison evokes in her question on “when time runs out” with respect to financial institutions. For, “falling out” implicates the web of materialities that are embedded within these small gestures. That these materialities are integral to this multiplicity of subtle forces, however, may show us certain limits to seeing decision-making in terms of transparent “market values.” Thus, different from a general theory of abandonment, “falling out” seems to guide us to its singularity, which cannot be understood apart from those common conditions of life.

Leading up to this discussion, Das asks if this form of ordinary ethics is gendered and if so, how? While there is a tendency within the literature in Chile to

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3. For reasons of space, I cannot fully go into a discussion of how the figure of the neighbor as radical alterity presumes a figure of the stranger that is also radically other (Candea and da Col 2012). I want to briefly note, however, that my reading of Simmel’s ([1908] 1971) discussion of the stranger differs from those readings that take it up as affirming the radical alterity of the stranger. Rather, I see Simmel as elaborating the stranger on the basis of “common characteristics” with the group; it is the specific proportion of nearness and remoteness of those common qualities that configures the relationship to the stranger. The figure of the stranger too may therefore involve pictures of otherness other than that of radical alterity.

rely on gender ideologies that identify the enforcement and policing of gender norms for women, I find it more helpful to acknowledge that, in this specific actual social world, men and women have different distributions of roles with respect to the domestic. Women express their concern for caring for their children, of containing “critical moments” within their intimate kin; men, on the other hand, see their roles as providing for the household, even if, in actuality, this was not always the case. The everyday tasks of childrearing, of caring for intimate kin, of participating in *la polla*, and of administering the household finances provides a kind of attunement to the small signs of the critical moment. Existentially knowing how difficult it is to endure and the stakes in enduring may not only teach one that one may need help outside of the network of intimate kin and friends, but also *how* that help might be performed.

Taking gender as a normal category in the weave of life rather than marking out gender as an exceptional category, as Marjorie Murray suggests in marking out “the ideals of motherhood,” has implications for how we understand the place and force of the normative in everyday life. Yes, cultural norms are evident in the distribution of gender roles, but as the ethnography’s chapters have shown, the very ways in which women and men relate to these norms are variable. And furthermore, as the ethnography also shows, the effects of women’s integration in the labor force or in political movements is not a simple story of empowerment: they have affected women in multiple and contradictory ways.

In seeking to account for gender differences, Murray, however, appeals to *agape* love in a “Catholic ontology,” which, while implicit, “still operates as a guiding reference of moral and cosmological order.” Thus, the subtle performances involved in helping a neighbor while maintaining her dignity are overshadowed by the fact of the help itself, which is seen as a kind of “mad” love which spills over into all social relations. I query the underlying impulse to see a “Catholic ontology” as the motivating force in the efforts at surviving economic precariousness: that is, to assert a “cosmological order” as a “guiding reference” in the lives of the poor. In other words, why would low-income women’s responses to actual material conditions of economic precariousness—that is, the ordinary responses to violence and suffering—need such resounding forms of explanation? Is it not conceivable that there are such stakes in dignity, although the sensibility of dignity itself evolved in relation to Catholic notions of charity? We might recall the common phrase by which women express their resentments with poverty programs: *no estoy limosneando* [I am not asking for alms].

From this vantage point of gender as a normal, rather than marked, category, I also respond to Anne Allison’s question: “why and for whom is the attachment to this heteronormative familial form so strong?” In this world, marriage by law or by cohabiting is considered to be a universal norm by both men and women; I am hesitant to try to provide an explanation as to *why* that is. While there are also multiple relational modes in which women are enmeshed, from intimate friends to neighborliness, none of these modes challenge the norm of marriage between men and women. Rather than try to subvert these norms through my writing, however, I took it as my place as an ethnographer to simply attend to the desires and hopes that those who live in this world expressed.

As it may be quite clear by now, I prefer to stay at the level at which I can attend carefully to symptoms and signs. How then might a philosophical question

blossom through this way of engaging a world? I might take Das' intriguing question concerning the figure of the neighbor as an instance of this form of theorizing. Jackson, too, raises the question of how abstract questions relate to the concrete. The emphasis I locate in his response might be phrased as how philosophical questions exert pressure on anthropological thought. I appreciate that emphasis in his remark that I "leav[e] aside the more general questions concerning the ontological dimensions of exchange, sacrifice, and natural justice that Graeber, in the tradition of Marx and Mauss, broaches." Here, I might just ask that we further elaborate the notion of ontology. In recent anthropological literature concerned with ontology, as I understand it, ontology emerges in anthropology in part to reintroduce difference as radical alterity, a difference that a picture of culture seems not able to exert (see Henare et al. 2007; Venkatesen 2010; Vivieros de Castro 1998). (There are many questions that can be asked of this literature: Are these worlds absolutely independent? In what way might the ethnographic description in works concerned with ontology slide into culture?) Yet, what I have found so compelling in the discussion of the figure of the neighbor emerging out of my own ethnography is not a picture of otherness as radical alterity, but rather the picture of otherness that emerges from the concrete neighbor next door.

Asking what the nature of our questions are and how we ask them returns me to my sense of responsibility as an anthropologist. This is how I take Anne Allison's question, "What, if anything, can one do about it—and is this the work . . . of anthropology?" Anthropology's public roles are multiple and can have distinct temporalities: between immediate involvement to long-term perspectives; from countering and critically engaging official versions of reality to carefully engaging the way life is frayed and rewoven. None of these roles and temporalities are mutually exclusive, and many of these roles are not simple choices by the self-sovereign subject. I have found myself drawn to the everyday and commit myself to the forms of long-term hard work that ethnography demands. Yet, in specific circumstances, I have been moved to document immediate abuses and to help facilitate, as best I could, institutional responses to it. Neither are heroic responses and neither forms of response provide me with a narrative of global injustice that could feed a stable sense of moral indignation. Rather, in attending to the ways in which life is precariously woven and showing how those conditions of precariousness may counter the official version of Chile, *Life in debt* expresses my aspiration to be attentive, watchful, and responsive to the suffering in this world.

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