

From an ethnography of the everyday to writing echoes of suffering

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Abstract

Veena Das has introduced a major shift in our contemporary conception of ethnography. While she brings forward a new way of looking at everyday life, which is already a major achievement, she also offers a conceptual resolution to a classical unresolved opposition between the individual and the collective, and between idiosyncratic psychology (subjectivity) and collective modes of thinking, through a challenging debate on what makes one a member of a group and yet radically distinct from all others. The ethnography in her book *Affliction* stands on three major pillars: The first is the ethnographer's subjective position in the field regarding the issues of lives, testimony, and research. The second is the neighborhood as the site of fieldwork, with all of its heterogeneity, rather than the group, such as an ethnic or racial group or one cohering around another criterion of belonging. The third and final pillar is the focus on the ordinary through ethnography of the everyday. I then illustrate Veena Das's perspective on subjectivity with my own fieldwork with survivors of the Cambodian genocide.

Keywords

everyday, suffering, subjectivity

Veena Das has introduced a major shift in our contemporary conception of ethnography. While she brings forward a new way of looking at everyday life, which is already a major achievement, she also offers a conceptual resolution to a classical unresolved opposition between the individual and the collective, between idiosyncratic psychology (subjectivity) and collective modes of thinking, through a challenging debate on what makes one a member of a group and yet radically distinct from all others. What seems to me the most exciting move in these conceptions of everyday life and singularity is that they are truly generated from the field and from what one might call ‘the tricky part of reality’, which Das wants to reach through a particular mode of doing ethnography. Many of us rightly consider Das as one of the most important theoreticians in recent times, and not only in the field of anthropology. But precisely because she is a remarkable theoretician she does not try to coerce reality to make it confirm to pre-given concepts. Rather, she gathers from the field all the elements that will make reality knowable. But what is reality? What is the observer’s point of view on reality? And, one might ask, which reality? Is it the reality of the observer? Or that of informants, who might offer a different take on what constitutes reality – and so on...

In *Affliction: Health, Disease, Poverty*, Das (2015, 25) tries to provide an answer to these vexing questions: ‘I have seen my task, above all’, she writes, ‘as that of rendering knowable the lives I encountered’. This, then, is what reality is for an anthropologist such as Das: ‘to render knowable ... lives’. In other words, reality can be reached and restituted through the fragments of lives, or forms of life, that the ethnographer sometimes shares with the people she encounters. The question that follows is: how is it possible to tie together modes of participation, observation, and analysis with research findings in writing that will render the lives encountered as knowable? The issue of writing is therefore essential (a point I take up later), but the issue of the ethnographer’s position and angle of observation is the key in Das’s work.

It seems to me that the ethnography in *Affliction* stands on three major pillars: The first is the ethnographer’s subjective position in the field regarding the issues of lives, testimony, and research. The second is the neighborhood as the site of fieldwork, with all its heterogeneity, rather than a group such as an ethnic or racial group or one defined by a pre-existing criterion of belonging that would assimilate all individuals meeting that criterion into a hypothetically coherent social entity. The third and final pillar is the focus on the ordinary through ethnography of the everyday.

The ethnographer’s subjective position

Most of the ethnography Das presents in her books is in the nature of scenes in which Das is present, so that there is not much of a distance between the scene she is describing and

that she is analyzing. Even when she is recalling events of violence that are in the past, she looks at the effects, scrutinizing the past through its constant reactualization in everyday life in the present.

Just like the novelist and her characters, Das is able to live with, to live beside, to live through, and sometimes to live instead of her 'informants' (in these cases the term 'informant' is not appropriate, and I would prefer the term 'character', as in theater). As an actor who can make us experience the feel of a character, her ethnography makes us share the experience of an event (not the event itself). With the fullness of her experience, through long-term experience, Das can speak in her own name, sometimes on behalf of her informants, and other times also instead of (or in the place of) her informants. By occupying all those different places, Das brings a kind of three-dimensional ethnography, just like a three-dimensional reality, into view. Yet, her ethnography is not one that any language can capture. With its brightness, its darkness, its uncertainty, and its puzzles, it is this language and not any other that will do.

Das is there in the scenes and she has something to do: helping a poor schizophrenic patient, advocating for an abused woman, defending civil rights after the assassination of Indira Gandhi, healing victims and preventing more violence against the Sikhs (see Das 2007). In all those scenes the ethnographer shares something more than a close understanding of the situation (which is already something important): she shares lives and the ungraspable diverse elements of life. The anthropologist becomes an authentic political agent in the scene that is being explored. She can bear witness to what she sees; she can advocate for the protection of civil rights; she can heal and care for vulnerable people in poor neighborhoods.

But what is it that she cannot do? What are the actions that, as an anthropologist, she would not do because she would not feel she has the permission to go that far? And furthermore, what is the relation between being politically implicated – her mode of participation or activism – and her research? The answer can be read from Das's position on activism in anthropology. For many anthropologists, activism and research are two different aspects of anthropology. Even a well-known activist anthropologist such as Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1995) makes a clear distinction between activism, that which the anthropologist has to do in order to defend the rights of the people she studies, and research, the collection of data, analysis, and publishing for academic purposes that should be (more or less) free of ideological underpinnings. In other words, the anthropologist might use their expert knowledge to advance the cause of justice or rights through advocacy or bearing witness but the knowledge itself is produced without any reference to this activist impulse. For these anthropologists, knowledge creation and activism are two separate kinds of actions. The first enlightens the second but research is in itself untouched by the activism.

Das, it seems to me, advances a different position. There is no distinction in her work between activism and research, insofar as, for her, anthropological knowledge arises from the anthropologist's active participation in the observed scene. It is because the anthropologist shares the same space, breathes the same air, and feels the same horror or the same empathy that they are able to give words to what has been said or not said in the ethnographic scene. One might say then, putting words in Das's mouth: 'You have to live with people, if you want to encounter their lives'. Only then does it become possible to put into words the fragments of experience, the feeling of life, and the bodily reactions, and to delineate what is said and what is not. What can be said in a specific context reveals at the same time what cannot or must not be said.

Giving meaning to what is not said requires a critical proximity to people, in order to catch other expressions, gestures, or emotions that would express the same thing without having to use words, whether they are forbidden or simply unavailable in a specific context. The only way to get in touch with the everyday and to analyze how the ordinary transforms the perceived experiences is to get as close as possible to the scene in order to analyze and to be part of this scene. The question is not to go back to the earlier postmodernist deconstruction of reality,¹ for Das does not say that the lives of others are unknowable. She does not claim that there is no other choice than to write like a novelist; it is in ethnographic writing that she finds the means to make known the feelings and emotions she encounters. As for postmodern writers and their experiments in writing, these feelings and emotions are nothing else than partial and wrong impressions created by the myth of the unknowability of the other. For Das, otherness is knowable through suffering. Even if otherness is not clearly objectified, it remains partially subjectivized. What is the meaning of 'subjectivized' in this specific context? To get closer to the possibility of grasping the subjectivity of the other, one needs a key concept that might avoid the usual barriers that posit an impenetrable separation between us and them.

Taking the givenness of notions such as ethnic groups, cultural minorities, or other familial or affiliative communities smuggles a solid boundary, a distinction between us and them, within our language itself. These notions are indeed relevant concepts in anthropology when it comes to describing customs and beliefs or specific cosmologies of social groups, but the risk is that such concepts create the illusion of an impermeable border between us, the observers, and them, the observed. Here is the second major shift that Das makes in taking the neighborhood as the social entity in her study.

1 See for example Clifford and Marcus 1986.

Neighborhood: The ethnographer's scale

Neighborhood is used in Das's analysis as the basic ethnographic unit through which everyday reality is revealed, capturing the movement of individuals in their everyday lives, their beliefs, their conceptions, their doubts, their sense of honor, their uncertainty, their faults, their mistakes, their good or mean actions. This is a remarkable tool to observe the long-time effect of violence, and especially of what is not said, as the politics of the everyday reveals itself in a movement that Das characterizes as the 'descent into the ordinary'. Neighborhood is a fact: it is not an abstract construction referring to a hypothetical collectivity of the 'same or similar people' supposedly sharing the same values, the same points of view, the same behavior, and the same explanation. This group 'identity' does not exist, even if it can be turned into a powerful construction that will sometimes lead to mass killings, as for instance in communal riots in India and genocides in Cambodia and in Rwanda.

The real collective level of lives as lived is not a construction; it is a fact. I should like to say, an indisputable fact. The neighbors, the relatives, the people you live with – no matter if you like them or not, and even if you hate them; no matter if they share the same values, no matter if they share the same explanations of what is happening as you do – they share the same space, breathe the same air, live the same contradictions and so on. They are affected (even if differently) by the same things. And this is the right level to capture narratives, as these are sometimes told and other times through silences and murmurs of whisperings.

Clara Han (2015) has introduced the remarkable notion of 'echoes of death' to describe the objective consequences of a person's death in his or her family or neighborhood. Those consequences involve pain, suffering, and mourning but also other changes (social, economic, etc.) that can occur in the family and in the close neighborhood relations after the loss of someone. I think it is a real innovation to have a concept that allows the observation and the conceptualization of damage caused by invisible wounds left by the death of relatives. This concept requires the ethnographer to participate as an actor, able to subjectivize the everyday life of the other. For example, in Clara Han's (2015) chapter on these themes, the ethnographer is present in the ethnographic scene. She writes in the first person to recall the story of the boy who has been killed by the police in Santiago. But the use of the first person in her account is not a way to express her own feelings and emotions; rather, it is the only way to express the full dimension of what it means to share life in the same neighborhood that becomes the ethnographic scene. These two methodological innovations should work together through the subjectivization of the ethnographer's own experience of everyday life in the neighborhood. And these innovations allow anthropology to investigate everyday life through the ordinary.

The ordinary, everyday life, and subjectivization

Das's ability to transform and apply Wittgenstein's notion of the ordinary in anthropological work is perhaps one of the major achievements in recent anthropology. I will desist from offering yet another comment on this great innovation, as it has already been discussed and theorized in numerous writings and publications (see Cavell 2007; Laugier 2016; Deutcher 2016). Instead, I would like to draw attention to different perspectives that the use of the 'ordinary' brings into anthropology. To explore this new dimension in the anthropology of subjectivity, I will try to bridge it with my own field research on survivors of the Cambodian genocide.

'Nobody can die instead of me', wrote Jacques Derrida (1999, 64). This statement is an extraordinary way to successfully capture the singular human condition in very few words. Nobody can have an embodied knowledge of someone else's death. This might be the best definition for singular subjectivity, precisely because it does not refer to any specific psychological condition. Compassion is not the point here, for the issue is not 'suffering with', not even 'suffering for', as if I was proposing to die instead of someone else. No, the idea is much more radical than that. Is it possible to be the 'I' of someone else at the very moment this person is dying? The answer is by definition in the negative; there is no other 'I' that can take the place of the 'I' of the dying 'I', even for an anthropologist! This could be a definition of ethnography, at least one influenced by Das's propositions: the attempt to be as close as possible to someone else's 'I'. This 'I' of the anthropologist is not to be defined in terms of self-consciousness, or even as Ego, but simply as the grammatical subject of lives.

In a powerful essay on subjectivity in language, the linguist Emile Benveniste (1971, 226) gives an astute definition of the pronoun 'I' that could be applied equally to the speaking 'I' of ethnography: "'I' refers to the act of individual discourse in which it is pronounced, and by this it designates the speaker. ... The reality to which it refers is the reality of discourse'. Following this grammatical perspective one may grasp someone else's experience in relation to the singularity of their life from an anthropological perspective without using (or should I say misusing) a projective psychological framework. The singular experience is distinct from the anthropological category of experience as it is embodied in two different levels of subjectivity: the subjective experience and the subjectivization of experience. While the first one is generally unknown, as it is partially unconscious and then not completely expressed in the process of narration, the second is shaped precisely by the process of narration.

In recent years, experience as subjectivation has been made into an anthropological object, while, the first, the subjective experience, has been left to clinicians and psychologists, and to the philosophers, but not from the point of view of an empirical analysis.² It seems to me, however, following Das's work, that subjective experience could be made into an anthropological object too if we found the methods to do that. The easiest way to this route could be to claim that there is no difference between the first and the second way of conceptualizing experience – that the way experience is subjectivized with cultural, contextual, political, and psychological elements *is* the subjective experience. Indeed, the Foucauldian perspective on subjectivization makes precisely this claim, but it ends up, unfortunately, in a very restrictive understanding of experience.

Following a different path, we can find many ethnographic examples of the distinction between subjective experience and the subjectivization of experience. I will borrow one example from Das, who discusses a case of men facing the loss of a child (Das 2015; see also Das et al. 2012). In summary: she explains that women in India seem to have access to a vocabulary to express the loss of children. The existence of such a vocabulary, she explains, is partly an expression of the value placed on motherhood and partly reflects the fact that genres of lamentation for women allow pain, grief, or mourning to be publicly expressed. One might say that the subjective suffering finds a possible subjectivization as the individual's experience of the loss of a child can be projected into existing 'patterns' that recognize or provide a standing language for women's emotions. A similar vocabulary for men's suffering does not exist for Hindu men. There is no way for men to subjectivize this experience of loss in terms of suffering that can be publicly or intersubjectively expressed. Does it mean that men don't suffer from the death of a child because they don't have the vocabulary to express their emotions? We don't know and cannot know. Some men might suffer; some others might not suffer. Following Marcel Mauss (1927), we can only say that in the absence of a local vocabulary of suffering, we have no way of knowing if some men suffer or not. From an anthropological perspective the question is, therefore: how do some men find ways to express their suffering without the availability of a standing language of suffering? The lack of a vocabulary and related lack of expression for the subjective experience of men confronted with the loss of a child might itself be regarded as a possible subjectivization of this experience, but it might not be the only one. Other expressions may be found outside the standing languages of suffering.

The subjectivization of experience is a construction, one can say, a performance. It has something to do with narrative. While the subjective experience is at the same time the

2 See, for example, Kleinman 1995 and Kleinman, Das, and Lock 1997.

subjectivization of the experience, it is also something else. In the previous example it is simultaneously a form of subjectivization that men do not express their feelings, and also that they might try to express their emotions differently, should they feel emotions such as grief or anger. So, it is not an opposition between subjectivization and subjective experience (the social performance of a self versus the inner reality of a psychological self), but rather a distinction between two social facts that sometimes overlap, and sometimes do not.

In the case of extreme everyday violence, this distinction can be useful for grasping this ‘something else’ that goes beyond the subjectivization of experience. I use the term ‘echoes of suffering’ as a metaphor to describe this kind of fragment of experience that does not fit a chronological narrative. Furthermore, this is also a metaphor to go beyond the concepts of trauma, the unspeakable, the impossible, and resilience, which have overwhelmed the field of extreme violence with medical notions in recent years (see Fassin and Rechtman 2009 for a critique of the ubiquity of trauma discourse in contexts of violence and collective suffering).

Everyday life under the Khmer Rouge: Ethnography of the ordinary, of everyday death

Das captures the ordinary, the routine, and the quasi event, as opposed to the critical and the catastrophic. Her work brings important methodological tools to explore how critical and catastrophic events can also be conceptualized as moments in everyday life. For example, consider what it was like to live under the Khmer Rouge regime during the four years of catastrophic violence:

To be deported in working camps (that were not camps just paddy fields), separated from relatives and friends, alone, with no hope. Spending all day long working in those paddy fields, having no food, no clothes (just black pajamas), no time to rest, just very few hours to sleep, then going back to work, having to carry heavy stones, hearing propaganda songs and threats pouring out from huge loudspeakers that never stopped shouting night and day. No one to talk with, no one to trust, no friends, no lover, no children, no parents, nothing! Nothing else than thousands of anonymous prisoners sharing the same condition and the same destiny, very few guards, generally invisible, and many dead corpses floating on the paddy field or putrefied on the dust of the ground. Every day, every week, every month, during 4 years. (Rechtman and Loriga 2017, n.p.)

The notion of event cannot fit this reality, because death is not an event anymore, it is just an ordinary fact. I suppose we could just refer to trauma, and thus evade the essential issues, and eventually say nothing about the reality that those people experienced. Or we have to

take the facts of those lives as having become ordinary, part of everyday life, in order to understand how people lived – not just survived – without having any thought of the perpetrators' responsibility, without having any time to accuse them in their minds, to think for them, or about them, without having any idea of future testimony, because there is no more future. We don't have much ethnographic data on those ordinary moments under a criminal state. I am not talking about people who collaborate with perpetrators. I'm talking about victims.

But just as 'experience' is not a transparent category, 'victim' too is not transparent in its meaning. Victim is not a condition of interiority. It might be a juridical condition, but one arrived at after the fact. But at the time of the occurrence of those facts, the term 'victim' could not bring any intelligibility to the everyday experience of those people. It did not shape their whole life or condition. So we have to investigate such facts by putting a distance between our investigation and the reductionism that the notion of victim carries. It means tracking the ordinary inside the critical event. Don't let the drama, the extreme violence, hide the fact that as long as they are not dead, they live... So the question is how? Not from an ideological point of view – like 'how are such things possible?' as if we 'expect' that these should not be possible – not even from an ethical point of view, but from a material, technical point of view.

With the exception of Primo Lévi (1958) and Robert Antelme (1957), whose writings are probably the two most important descriptions of the universe of concentration camps and their everyday life, most of the accounts that survivors wrote gave a chronological development of the story. One can learn from these writings about incredible horrors that one could not have imagined before. Then one can imagine what the terrible looks like under those dramatic circumstances. But this is much more a tale or a fiction that helps those who were not there to understand, from their perspective as standing outside those events, what could have happened to them. It gives a possible identification with victims because, behind this indescribable horror, everything looks the same as what people experience under 'usual' conditions. In fact, all those accounts and testimonies try to give the same temporality, the same sense of life, the same sense of injustice and shame, the same capacity to separate reality from delusion, or illusion, that one would experience outside. In other words, those stories give us a tale, or a narrative, that borrows its parameters from usual types of experience, but it is based on a denial, at the same time, of all other parameters that in fact determine the sense of the everyday of these extreme situations. All those testimonies are then historically true, but ethnographically fictional.

In this case, 'fictional' – understood ethnographically – means that the attempt to create an understandable narration (in other words, historical) of life under terrible circumstances, as under the Khmer Rouge, highlights events that will become traumatic events afterwards, but

are perceived as non-events at the time of their occurrence. The fictionalization of narrative is there, for example, when a witness tries to embody these non-events in a narrative that will try to show how these experiences were already part of major events that they will later become ... after the fact.

The questions, therefore, are: How is it possible to render knowable the fragments of experiences and the echoes of suffering that constitute the everyday life from the inside of the killing machine? And what kind of writing may enable this transcription?³

When time does not exist, when day and night are merged, when there is no more frontier between realities, dream, thinking or delusion. When the past is forgotten, when the future does not exist anymore, when present is the only possible horizon of life and lasts all the time. A present time that lasts for hours and hours, days and days, months and months and so on. It is exactly what I have heard from people who live somewhere / or should I say nowhere / with no past and no future. (Rechtman and Loriga 2017, n.p.)

Psychologists would say that this is the mark of trauma or of their famous 'unspeakable', as if the lack of a constructed narrative was itself the proof of a traumatic failure that prohibits the possibility of a telling. But another possibility is to imagine that those fragments of experience are exactly the subjective experience of what happened to them and at the same time an attempt to give a subjectivization of this experience. For the large number of survivors from Cambodia, but from elsewhere too, who have those kinds of fragmented memories of details, facts, dates, locations, etc., but with no precise description of feelings and emotions of a time haunted with no time, this might be the 'experience' itself, not the breakdown of experience caused by trauma. In that sense, ethnographers have to study this material like any other field material without overwriting it with medical notions such as trauma, delusion, dissociation, hallucination, and unspeakable, or even through local idioms of distress that play exactly the same role as medical knowledge to somehow re-establish the authority of their own representations.

When refugees express those fragments of experience, they will never explain that there was no more future or past; they will never say that their only horizon was just the next second of life; they will never say that thoughts, dreams, illusions, delusions were mixed together. No, they really will not. But they will simply recall a fragment of experience without the boundaries of time, without reality frontiers, without distinction between their own body and

3 See Rechtman 2000, 2006.

a floating dead corpse, with no limits between human beings and ghosts, between dream and reality.

I would like to emphasize that the lack of all the parameters that usually mark off narratives is not a consequence of trauma, but instead signifies the birth of new parameters that mark off these types of subjective experiences and the subjectivization of those experiences. It might not happen all the time. But it happens sometimes! And ethnography has to transcribe it as and when it happens. It is not just pathology, or delusion, or trauma. It is an everyday experience in times of extreme violence. And this is what I call ‘echoes of suffering’. They are not complete stories or narratives; they are just fragments of perception, body perceptions as well as outside perceptions. They are not just unconscious drives, but social and collective expressions of the lack of usual limits that allow the expression of rational narratives. It means that these expressions have their own rationality, which anthropology has to explore and furthermore transcribe.

This is the second reason why I call these experiences ‘echoes of suffering’. Because the process of writing these experiences should be like echoes bounced off the ethnographer. The solution has to come within the scene of writing itself: instead of writing in my name, or in the name of the other, or in the place of others, I try to write from the ‘inside’ of otherness to capture and circulate echoes of suffering, through an ‘I’, as a grammatical occurrence that refers to the act of the discourse of the voiceless (see Rechtman 2013.)

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Richard Rechtman is a psychiatrist, psychoanalyst, and anthropologist. He is Director of Studies (Full Professor) at the Ecole des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, where he holds the Chair of Anthropology of Subjectivity. He is also the Director of the Laboratoire d'Excellence Tepsis (<https://tepsis.io>), a cluster of leading research units in the political and social sciences, and codirector of the bilingual online encyclopedia *Politika: le politique à l'épreuve des sciences sociales* [*Politika: politics apprehended via the social sciences*] (<https://politika.io>). In 1990 he set up a program for specialized psychiatric consultations for Cambodian refugees at the Centre Philippe Paumelle in Paris, a scheme he has run ever since. His research lies at the intersection between the social sciences and the practice and theory of psychoanalysis, and examines how the notion of trauma is constructed and used, together with its analytic relevance.

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