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Deleuze and the Anthropology of Becoming — [Source link](#)

João Biehl, Peter Locke

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approximate art. These projects seem distinct—with distinct stakes—and this distinction might be worth exploring further.

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In different life worlds and against the odds, Catarina, Maja, and Milan search for ways to articulate the actual and the possible. How to take such searches and struggles into account? In this article, Biehl and Locke write “for a certain vision of anthropology” in which actual people and their words, lives, and desires are at the core of anthropological inquiry. Here, Deleuze’s reflections on becoming provide inspirations, but not recipes, for a people-centered ethnography that illuminates the “leakiness” of social fields from the shadows of deterministic analysis. Given their concerns, it seems most appropriate to consider the way in which Deleuze’s insights articulate with their specific ethnographic contexts. In following their call for a people-centered approach—one that I deeply share—I weave between their ethnographic works and my own in La Pincoya, a low-income neighborhood in Santiago, Chile, to explore one thread, listening, as it critically engages the implications of “becoming” in anthropology.

To begin, I draw inspiration from Michel Foucault’s discussion of listening in ancient philosophy (Foucault 2005 [1982]). In philosophical ascesis, listening is ambiguous. In its passivity, it is the sense that exposes the soul to the surprises of the outside world (*pathetikos*). But it is also the only sense through which virtue is learned and the *logos* best received (*logikos*). Listening is not an art (*techne*): it does not hinge on knowledge. Rather, it combines *empeiria* (acquired skill) and *tribē* (diligent practice) as “the permanent support” (a potential) for the individual’s bond to truth. This discussion resonates in La Pincoya, where women speak of “catching” or “comprehending” (verb: *cachar*) others’ difficulties in a context where dignity marks the human from the inhuman. Difficulties are kept “within” the home, while “begging” to neighbors runs the risk of having that beg heard as a whine. But hardships seep out—for example, through a child’s cry from hunger—and are “caught” by neighbors in a kind of perceptive net, generating acts of care, an acknowledgement without asking. Exposure to the unexpected, acquired skill, and diligent practice constitute this perceptive net and sketch a form of life that subjects at once hold on to and test the limits of.

For Biehl, I understand the perceptive net in the anthropologist’s work with an individual. With Catarina and her dictionary, Biehl is confronted with how to re-create the life worlds that failed her. Catarina takes Biehl by surprise, and he responds with the “acquired skill” and “diligent practice” to acknowledge an other. What does Biehl do? He pieces together clues. He returns to her family and the psychiatric

hospital. He sees how Catarina was both expelled by and inhabits marginally a form of life.

Here, Deleuze’s insights on literature and becoming articulate with Biehl’s acknowledgement of Catarina’s desire. Catarina writes a becoming. Catkine is actualized through literature, as Catarina shifts to the third-person indefinite. A singularity generates a potential web of new relations in Vita: “Here it is Catkine.” From Biehl’s writing of a life world that expelled her to new relations actualized through desire, forms of life come into view for the reader against which and in which movement is called for.

For Locke, I was unsure whether Deleuze’s insights on “collective enunciation” elucidated or obscured landscapes of life in Sarajevo, a context informed by humanitarian psychosocial projects and market reform. Locke argues that rather than diagnose the city, the ethnographer enacts a literary listening, hearing “passages of life” that escape diagnosis. Clearly, there are stakes in how an ethnographer listens. But, how one listens is crucially tied to an attention to how words are used in specific contexts. It is tied to the multiplicity of the *who* of those “people” as constituted through their relations.

Instead of the smoothness of a collective “people,” I prefer the “rough ground” of words and relations. Take Milan. What constitutes “home” for him? Are meals eaten together? The details of Milan’s life world allows us to imagine how he generates other durational registers. It complicates the equation of an “[orientation] toward future possibilities” with “hope.”

In details, we break down classic distinctions between the individual and the collective. Listening—*pathetikos* and *logikos*, *empeiria* and *tribē*—is not what we ourselves would desire to hear, rendering optimism over despair (an expectation of the unexpected), but rather in listening to learn a lifeworld from others (the world surprising the soul). Listening allows us, as Geertz remarks, to distinguish a “wink” from an eye irritation or to acknowledge the uncertainty inherent in one’s attempt to distinguish it. In weaving a perceptive net in fieldwork and in writing—with the detail that it entails—we hear how a subject’s voice is projected outward and alternative forms of life are imagined and tested. I return to Deleuze’s image of a social field “leaking” on all sides. Are anthropologists challenged to go even farther? To explore just how it leaks and those leaks’ viscosity?

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In this interesting article, João Biehl and Peter Locke describe and analyze the life of a Brazilian woman called Catarina and some survivors of violence in Sarajevo through the philosophical ideas of the late Gilles Deleuze. Reading this article as part of a collective and comparative project coupled with the significant differences between the two countries, one im-

mediately gets expectations of a renewed demonstration that “a comparative perspective can lead to asking very useful and sometimes new questions” (Moore 1966:xix). This is not what Biehl and Locke do; of particular significance in their analysis is another interesting project: using Deleuze’s philosophical idea of “potentiality for becoming” to illuminate our understanding of cases similar to Catarina and postwar Sarajevo.

In order to construct their arguments, Biehl and Locke assert that ethnography and philosophical dialogues “[highlight] the limits of psychiatric models of symptoms and human agency.” This critique is repeated many times, although it lacks specificity and does not capture the complexities of psychiatric practice and research. There are psychiatrists who would agree with Biehl and Locke that violence creates a paradox of devastation and recovery. Other psychiatrists developed specific methods to refine diagnostic instruments and have done longitudinal studies during many years. Still others have developed comprehensive public mental approaches. Being someone involved in the past 12 years in multidisciplinary research on the manifold effects of the Mozambican civil war and famine, I think that the repetition of the critique of psychiatric models coupled with the lack of serious comparative anthropological analysis does not advance knowledge. The focus on these repetitions only delays the anthropological debates on how to develop relevant and clearly articulated concepts and cocktail methods to understand the complexities of the human toll of violence and trauma. Instead, one of the things that Biehl and Locke, following Deleuze and Guattari, write is that the symptom is “a bird beating its beak against the window.” It is unclear whether the symptom is the bird or the bird beating its beak against the window or the window that resists the beating or fails and breaks.

Although Biehl and Locke affirm that “people’s everyday struggles and interpersonal dynamics exceed experimental and statistical approaches,” they do not recognize the complexities of these approaches nor do they really engage with anthropological debates on the performativity of encounters between anthropologists and their interlocutors. But just such engagement is necessary in order to clearly grasp the limits of “intense listening.” Although they know that listening is far from being all that anthropologists do, Biehl and Locke could have also seriously engaged with other works dealing with issues of violence, creative resistance, and the politics of recovery (Lubkemann 2008; Schafer 2007). This lack of debate with similar disciplinary works and the author’s choice for critiquing psychiatry and statistical methods obfuscates the focus of their project of “writing *for* a certain vision of anthropology.” They ended up pushing the debate in the wrong direction and reinforced the misleading perception that to study violence, anthropologists need to critique psychiatry in order to justify their procedural choices.

The authors reiterate the importance of detail and context, but they do not clarify the meaning of detail and context and how these have to be worked through to advance their insights on *becoming*. It is a queue of details: Catarina’s sexual ex-

periences, the misshapen nose of Milan, and so forth. For example, regarding Catarina’s sexual experiences, their interpretation suggests desire. Why not also think that Catarina is trying to talk about rape? Nowhere is it explained how the numerous details form part of a systematic body of knowledge, the inclusion or exclusion criteria for selecting and communicating these details, the rules applied when editing the life of Catarina and Milan, the weight given to the quotations of the interlocutor’s statements, and the location where such enunciations are made. The authors could have clarified these issues and fleshed out their alternative research practices to understand “a people yet to come.” Particularly Biehl’s intuitive borrowing of simple play-therapy techniques indicates a tentative move toward a creative methodological cocktail in order to engage with individuals going through very disturbing predicaments. But Biehl and Locke do not systematically engage in a serious exploration of the potentialities of combining methodologies. Instead, inspired by the reflections of Deleuze, they shift between praising ethnographic methods and considering that others’ interventions appear as “highly limited and impoverished, restricted in imagination and out of touch” and “epistemologically myopic.” I have doubts that through this politics of persuasion and ill-informed polarization of research methods it is possible to mobilize lanterns to give visibility to the multifaceted experiences of people like Catarina and Milan.

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In “Lettre a un critique severe” (Deleuze 1990), Gilles Deleuze attempts to trace writing as flux rather than code. His purpose: to stir something up, make something move. In the same piece, Deleuze contends that there are two ways of reading a book. If one takes it as a box referring to an inside, thus seeking for its signified or signifier, one’s task would be to comment, interpret, demand explanation, and endlessly write the book of the book. The other way of reading a book is to take it as an a-signifying machine, which prompts the question, “Does it work, and how? How does it work for you?” This is an intensive mode of reading, in which there is nothing to explain or interpret. In other words, it is reading like an electric circuit, which relates the book immediately to the Outside: flux against flux, machine with machines, experimentation and events.

I would like to retain here this second form of reading as a way of establishing a zone of proximity with Biehl and Locke’s article, as it seems to me that the authors’ successful intervention was precisely to put to work certain Deleuzian notions such as becoming, rhizome, cartography, and mi-