

Introduction

Open thinking points beyond itself.

—Theodor W. Adorno, “Resignation”

When Hannah Arendt writes of “humanity in dark times,”¹ she is thinking mainly of the years between 1933 and 1945 and of the almost complete collapse of *humanitas* in Germany during this period. In singling out Karl Jaspers as someone who sustained a small space in which human decency was preserved, Arendt elaborates on what her mentor and friend called “the venture into the public realm.” This venture is always fraught. There is no guarantee that one’s words will be understood or that one’s actions have their desired effect. Though one works to weave the strands of one’s own life into the lives of others, one can never know the repercussions of what anyone says or does. “That is what is meant by a venture,” Arendt explains. And “this venture is only possible when there is trust in people. A trust which is hard to formulate. But one which is fundamental. *A trust in what is human in all people.* Otherwise such a venture could not be made.”²

This book echoes Arendt’s concerns. It argues that contemporary academic and political discourses based on notions of fixed identity and radical alterity lose sight of what all human beings have in common, despite their idiosyncratic, ethnic, cultural, or political differences. When Arendt speaks of the paradox of plurality she is mindful that, as a species, human beings share the same evolutionary history and confront similar existential quandaries, yet no two individuals are alike and very different adaptive strategies and worldviews have emerged in the course of human history. If we are to resist essentializing and reifying traits that make us appear different, thus creating irreconcilable divisions among us, *or between us and non-human life forms*,³ we must restore a sense of trust in what we and others have in common, even if it is the planet earth.

History brings home to us the fragility of this trust. Its presence is not only compromised by inequalities in wealth and power, as Zygmunt Bauman observes,⁴ but it is exponentially tied to the degree to which we

fetishize differences and discontinuities between ourselves and others and lose sight of what we share. Trust is only possible when one sees the other not only as different in features, manners, worldview, and language but also as oneself in other circumstances. What is realized in the other is recognized as a potentiality in oneself (and vice versa). Without this intersubjective trust, ventures into the public realm remain infinitely more perilous for the poor, for people of color, and for undocumented migrants than for those who claim exclusive rights to this realm and police it accordingly. In our contemporary world, the question of trust has also been made more urgent as electronic surveillance and the fetishization of data undermine traditional forms of face-to-face interaction, care, and conviviality.

Arendt's conception of "a trust in what is human in all people" is also basic to the project of ethnography, where one's relationships in the field carry a risk of mutual misunderstanding but also imply a willing suspension of disbelief, informed by the assumption that *as human beings* points of existential convergence and mutual understanding can always be found. These points are often predicated on shared phylogenetic traits like attachment or responses to separation and loss, as well as ontogenetic struggles to resolve sibling or Oedipal rivalries, reconcile our ties to things and our ties to persons, or strike a balance between competing existential strategies—agency and patiency, openness and closure, security and risk, self-realization and social constraint. It may come from wrestling with our vulnerability and mortality, or reflect "one of the major processes of our species, which has racked many, perhaps all, societies over thousands of years ... the rise and fall of fervently held beliefs, as humans continually strive to understand how the world works and the reasons for their happiness or suffering—and to act on these."⁵ To speak of the human condition, therefore, is to imply that existence not only is replete with contradictions, alternatives, and contrarities but is also characterized by ongoing struggles to resolve, accept, or overcome them.

This broaches the question of the relation between thought and being and the extent to which the complexities of existence can be described by means of words and concepts. In drawing a distinction between the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa*, and by insisting that thought is grounded in the interactions and interests of everyday social life, Hannah Arendt repudiates the Cartesian prioritization of the *res cogitans* (mind) over the *res extensa* (body) and argues that thinking is never the passive ruminations of self-sufficient minds, a "soundless dialogue we carry on with ourselves,"⁶ but a form of active engagement with those with whom we inhabit a common world. Like

sharing stories, giving gifts, and exchanging greetings, thinking is not necessarily predicated on what we consciously know or believe beforehand. Much of what we habitually do in the course of a day is done without a moment's reflection. And it is this body of basic social and physical coping skills, this implicit knowledge that is shared with many others, that enables us to synchronize movements and achieve social attunement, sharing food, reciprocating favors, playing host, being a good guest, or helping someone in need without an explicit script to guide us. Meaning is thus praxeological (a matter of the way we engage purposefully with others in a shared habitus) before it is epistemological (a matter of our knowledge of the world).⁷ And this is also something one learns in the course of fieldwork—that the most fruitful thinking is done in the course of interactions that are “this worldly” rather than “other worldly,” situated rather than abstracted, practically oriented rather than theoretically framed.⁸ When the discursive conventions of the academy, centered on reified coinages, arcane jargons, and fetishized categories work to widen the gap between us and those whose lifeworlds we purportedly seek to understand, we must confront the uncomfortable truth that we have allowed ourselves to participate in the neoliberal order that has ineluctably widened the gap between rich and poor. It is for this reason that the critique of identity thinking involves a suspension of one's political affiliation, either with the left or the right, the righteous or the wronged, since all human beings are susceptible to seeing the world at large solely from their own vantage point and reifying their particular perspective as if it were a universal truth. To militate against these tendencies, two strategies may prove useful. The first is to resist construing existential problems as reflections of one's own identity, or the identity of others, or a reflection of the identity of their relationships. Such a focus on who is in the right and who is in the wrong prevents everyone involved from seeing the problem itself. It is not simply their problem, but a human problem, and this changed perspective may enable them to approach it with greater clarity. It is not that no one is to blame, but rather that blaming others or oneself may be counterproductive in resolving the problem cooperatively.⁹ The second strategy is to focus not on where we differ from others—in our ethnicity, language, gender, history, class, or faith—but on what we have in common.

In making the case for diapraxis over dialogue, Naveed Baig, Lissi Rasmussen, and Hans Raun Iversen recall an international class on interfaith dialogue at the University of Copenhagen in 2012 and the difficulties of finding common ground for a productive and peaceable

encounter between Muslims and Christians, especially since two Nigerian students in the class had experienced the killing of a Christian neighbor's family in the furor following the Danish cartoon crisis in 2006. For these individuals, Muslims were evil.

In the middle of the term, the class heard a guest lecture by Dr. Johnson Mbillah, at that time director of *Programme for Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa*, who came along with a friend of his, a Muslim sheikh. Having introduced his friend and himself as respectively Muslim and Christian and both of them Africans, Dr. Mbillah asked, "So, this friend of mine, is he first an African or is he first a Muslim? And I myself, am I first an African or am I a Christian?" You could hear a pin drop before Dr. Mbillah answered his own question: "No, my friends, we are first of all human beings, both of us!"¹⁰

While identity thinking binds us together in discrete groups or tribes, it also blinds us to what connects us across time and space, and how our sense of being-in-the-world is subject to continual fluctuation. While analytical models and explanatory concepts tend to foster the illusion of determinate subjects (neoliberal, transnational, racial, modern) and bounded societies, human beings have been transgressing borders from time immemorial, and lived experience suggests constant mutations in the degree and intensity of everything from cultural conformity and self-consciousness, to emotional states, interpersonal trust, and religious belief.¹¹

When I reflect on my ethnographic sojourns in Aboriginal Australia and West Africa, and my experiences of traveling around the world, I do not recall incommensurable beliefs and insurmountable differences, but cultural variations on a recurring theme—our human tendency to think categorically and organize hierarchically, yet all the while blurring boundaries, crossing frontiers, and subverting hierarchies with empathic gestures toward equality and equity.

For thinkers like William James, Hannah Arendt, John Dewey, and Richard Rorty, the value of our speaking and writing is measured by the extent to which they help us cope with everyday life, carrying us into more fulfilling relationships with one another, and fostering coexistence. This same pragmatic spirit finds expression in Theodor W. Adorno's view that it is "delusional" to seek absolute truth or claim that "the real is rational" when what really matters is that Auschwitz does not happen again. "If philosophy is still necessary," he writes, "it is so only in the way it has been from time immemorial: as critique, as resistance to the expanding heteronomy."¹² Accordingly, it may be argued that humanity must not be contrasted with animality or materiality, and that humanism is best defined as a refusal to assign a

higher value to abstract ideas than to particular living beings or regard ideas and numbers as having a more urgent claim on our attentions than the faces of real people.

At the heart of Adorno's negative dialectics is a call for modes of thinking and writing that go beyond concepts that allegedly correspond to reality or conform to rules of logical discourse. As he puts it, "objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder ... the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived."¹³ For Adorno, concepts are no more identical with objects than a brand name is a true description of a product, a social stereotype captures the essence of every individual, or a photograph is identical with its subject. Photos, writes Roland Barthes, are "a kind of primitive theater, a kind of *Tableau Vivant*, a figuration of the motionless and made-up face" beneath which lies all that has been lost, left behind, or could not be held.¹⁴

Elsewhere, I have merged Adorno's idea of negative dialectics with images of the limitrophe and the penumbral. The term limitrophe (from Latin *limit-*, *limes* boundary + Greek *trophos*, nourishing) suggests the life-giving potential of places, people, and powers that lie beyond the pale of our established lifeworlds, and emphasizes that existential vitality depends on transgressing what has been prescribed by custom, internalized as habit, or enshrined in received ideas of truth and reality.¹⁵ The penumbral (from the Latin *paene*, almost + *umbra*, shadow) suggests a phenomenologically indeterminate zone "between regions of complete shadow and complete illumination," "an area in which something exists to a lesser or uncertain degree," and "an outlying or peripheral region."¹⁶ For William James, the penumbral reminds us that "our fields of experience have no more definite boundaries than have our fields of view," while his notion of "the more"¹⁷ conveys his conviction that neither the world within nor the world without can be completely captured or covered by conceptual thought. James is equally insistent that abstraction is not so much a rational means of mirroring the world but a magical defense against its refractory and incomprehensible aspects. Ian McEwan goes further, suggesting that our infatuation with abstract concepts and their endless interrelations implies a kind of fantasizing, in which the manipulation of ideas compensates us for our inability to manipulate the world.¹⁸

James's determination to "bring ideas and principles and beliefs down to the human level," "avoiding the violence [he] saw in abstractions," was his response to the horrors of the US Civil War.¹⁹ In a similar vein, Adorno's critique of identity thinking was, in part, his response to Hitler's reduction of humanity to an ascending series

of essentially incompatible racial types and national identities. In the aftermath of World War II, Adorno announced a new categorical imperative: that if thinking is not to entail hubris and harm, it must involve a continual, self-reflective “thinking against itself.”²⁰ If we are not to become infatuated by the categories into which we place people for academic, conversational, or administrative convenience—male versus female, friend versus enemy, black versus white—we need the reality testing experience of direct engagement with real people in real situations. In this sense, negative dialectics is an attempt “to say what something is, while identitarian thinking says what something comes under, what it exemplifies or represents, and what, accordingly, it is not itself.”²¹

Identity thinking²² is typical of bureaucracies in which people and objects are numbered, classified, and categorized as if their idiosyncratic features were less significant than their superficial similarities. Consider, for instance, the term “refugee” and the discourse that identifies this figure with an undifferentiated mass, a crowd, a problem, a pathology, described as if there were no individuating stories to be told and no comparison to be made with those who identify refugees in these ways.²³ Identity thinking may be instrumental to the administration of the world, but it is inimical to expressing the complexities of life, and it is a precondition for violence.

In his account of how native forests are radically redesigned and planted to maximize the commercial exploitation of their timber, James Scott makes a similar point. A state’s interest in commercial timber and revenue entails reducing the complex and variegated ecology of the forest to manageable dimensions. Quite simply, “The administrators’ forest cannot be the naturalists’ forest.” In the same way, a “schematized process of abstraction and simplification” reduces complex patterns of social and community life to bureaucratic formulae. “State agents have no interest ... in describing an entire social reality, any more than the scientific forester has an interest in describing the ecology of a forest in detail.”²⁴

Identity thinking risks degrading the very existence of whatever it subjects to ratiocination—a process that Niels Bohr called the “principle of destruction” (*Abtötungsprinzip*). As João Biehl observes, this process entails “bureaucratic procedures” that render “people invisible” and turn them into “absent things.”²⁵ The Nazi stereotype of “The Jew” already presaged a genocide, since the faces, names, lives, sensibilities, and situations of actual individuals disappeared without a trace behind the grotesque façade of the reified term. In the same way *Das Man* occludes any engagement with the many individual

beings who comprise the generalized “one.” These racial, social, and utilitarian abstractions do not give us anyone to relate to as a person like ourselves; they actually prevent and absolve us from having any empathy or compassion for those who have been assimilated to those abstractions. Speaking of the difference between *I-Thou* and *I-It* relationships, Martin Buber observes that whenever I extract from a person “the color of his hair, or of his speech, or of his goodness,” or identify him with a particular time or place, he “ceases to be Thou” and becomes an It.²⁶ Thus, with no firsthand knowledge of life in south Chicago, the president of the United States blames African-Americans (not their situations) for the murder rates in their neighborhoods and reduces their humanity to this statistic. Showing no compassion for the individual lives and stories of asylum-seekers, he orders the suspension of immigration from Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen as if the persecuted citizens of these countries are tarred with the same brush as their persecutors. Every day, egregious examples of this exclusionary and isolationist policy make the news headlines. It may be too early to say whether mockery (Charlie Chaplin’s *The Great Dictator* comes to mind) or widespread dissent (as during the Vietnam War) will prevent these policies from reaching their logical conclusion, but a comparison with the Nazi’s anti-Jewish decrees of 1933 may prove apposite. In a Manichean worldview, nature is exploited for human gain, and certain categories of human beings are assimilated into nature and treated as means whereby those who determine the ends—the creation of wealth, the expansion of power, the racial purity of the nation, the civilizing of the heathen—can realize their vision. In promulgating a series of opposed terms—mind/body, subject/object, enlightened/primitive, culture/nature—in which the first is assigned a higher value than the second, identity thinking gives spurious legitimacy to social distinctions between higher and lower classes of people, while perpetuating a narcissistic belief in the omnipotence of one’s own thought.

Our challenge is, however, to do more than condemn the identitarian thinking we find abhorrent—racism, sexism, ageism—by reflecting on the extent to which the generalizations we make in avowedly explaining or changing the world for the better actually lock us into similar discursive cages. In as much as liberal intellectuals frame their fields of study in categorical terms, they are hoisted by their own petard, for in their impassioned denunciations of racism and sexism, they paradoxically keep alive the discriminatory language they reject, while their invocations of humanism often reinforce their own parochial conceptions of human rights and diversity. All too often, the

rich and powerful act as if they alone possessed humanity and were free to assign it to or withhold it from the powerless as they wished. It is also necessary to remember that while the West paid lip service to Enlightenment values of reason, democracy, and humanism, it belied those ideals in the violence of colonization, slavery, and the genocide of indigenous populations—often in the name of king, country, and God.²⁷ It is equally important to note that for many peoples, diversity and humanity are not based on physical appearance or cultural identity, but on how a person behaves. Thus, for the Kuranko of Sierra Leone and Guinea, personhood (*morgoye*) is a matter of how one comports oneself in relation to others—a question of social nous. While whiteness signifies magnanimity and transparency, and blackness is associated with enemies and the minatory powers of witches, Kuranko do not identify “white people” (*tubabunu*) as good, or think of themselves as “black,” though enemies are referred to as *morgo fian* (“black people”). It is not that Kuranko are immune to stereotyping and scapegoating (see chapter 2), but not once during my many sojourns among them did people reduce my humanity to the color of my skin or the country I came from. Neither did they make blanket assertions about the intrinsic humanity or inhumanity of whites, but remarked how particular Europeans acted in relation to others, myself included.²⁸ Intelligence was a matter of social adroitness and practical know-how, and many Kuranko would readily concur with critical theory’s recurring theme—that abstraction not only implies an estrangement of thought from life, but finds its apotheosis in the terrorist’s appeal to God or the lynch mob’s invocation of racial purity to justify murder.²⁹ Reflecting on National Socialism’s xenophobic reduction of political life to a question of being for or against the state, Adorno observes that under such circumstances “freedom would be not to choose between black and white but to abjure such prescribed choices.”³⁰

World events in 2016–17—including the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom, the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States, the civil war in Syria, the migrant crisis in Europe, accelerating climate change, the rise of Isis, and the ever-widening gulf between haves and have-nots—have persuaded many people that we are again living in “dark times.” As an intellectual, teacher, and writer, I asked myself how I might respond to these events. What kind of speech and action were called for in our beleaguered age? My initial impulse was to go back to some of the critical thinkers—notably Hannah Arendt, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and Karl Jaspers—whose work was profoundly influenced by the catastrophes that overwhelmed the world in the middle of the last century. This prompted me to rethink

the ethnographic method of “participant-observation” pioneered by Bronislaw Malinowski during his sojourn in the Trobriand Islands during World War I, not simply as a means of “doing anthropology” but as exemplifying the kind of practical humanism that Hans-Georg Gadamer defined as “keeping oneself open to what is other—to other, more universal points of view”³¹ and not assuming that one’s own worldview can be made a yardstick for measuring others.

What practical steps can we take to think and act without the conceptual railings and bridges that Friedrich Nietzsche cautioned us against clinging to?³² This is more than a matter of applying the phenomenological epoché, invoking the naïve view that it is possible to “tear aside the web of concepts”³³ and experience life authentically and atheoretically; rather it demands moving outside our comfort zones and risking ourselves in situations where our mother language is not spoken, our customs not recognized, our expectations not confirmed, and our identities not recognized. This book is therefore a plea not to allow our craving for security and community to lead us to embrace the illusions of consolation, salvation, and omniscience that are offered by religion, politics, and science alike, but to perpetually make and remake ourselves in relation to others as if nothing were certain. It is also a reminder of the nuances, intricacies, and complexities that literature has always emphasized over generalizations and stereotypes. “Begin with a type,” F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote, “and you find you have created nothing.”³⁴ In a similar vein, Aminatta Forna dismisses “classifying [as] the very antithesis of literature. The way of literature is to seek universality. Writers try to reach beyond those things that divide us: culture, class, gender, race. Given the chance, we would resist classification. I have never met a writer who wishes to be described as a female writer, gay writer, black writer, Asian writer or African writer.”³⁵ For Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, our lives and lifeworlds comprise a multitude of overlapping stories, and it is the task of every writer worth her salt to avoid “the danger of a single story,” such as the story of Africa as a synonym for poverty, catastrophe, and violence, a story in which “Africa” is assigned a single identity when, in reality, the term is a complete misnomer.³⁶