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ANTHROPOLOGY, DESIRE, AND TEXTURES OF LIFE: AN INTERVIEW WITH VEENA DAS

"The thing about being an anthropologist is that you get to see what it means to have a taste for life". This was one of the many beautiful thoughts on anthropology, desire, life, and devotion that Veena Das shared in a first meeting with us, held virtually on January 21, 2021. Das is Krieger-Eisenhower Professor of Anthropology at Johns Hopkins University since 2000 and also affiliated to the Institute for Socio-Economic Research in Development and Democracy (ISERDD), based in Delhi.[1] She is the author of a vast body of work that covers topics such as violence, social suffering, urban poverty, health, everyday life, ordinary ethics, and the State. Soon before our meeting, she had just released her book *Textures of the ordinary: doing anthropology after Wittgenstein* (Das, 2020a).

Veena Das' work has had a significant impact on Brazilian anthropology since the 1990s, when it began to be read especially in graduate courses and to inspire creative dialogues on themes of strong ethnographic tradition in Brazil, such as violence, urban poverty, and State practices. Her conference at the 1998 Annual Meeting of the National Association of Graduate Studies and Research in Social Sciences (Anpocs), introduced by Brazilian anthropologist Mariza Peirano and published in Portuguese (Das, 1999), contributed to making her widely known among Brazilian scholars. Furthermore, since the previous decade, her dialogue with Peirano resulted in fruitful reciprocal reflections on Brazilian and Indian anthropologies (Peirano, 1998).

Although other articles of hers have been translated and published in Brazil (Das 2007, 2011, 2017), it was only in 2020 that one of her books was integrally published in Portuguese. *Vida e palavras: a violência e sua descida ao or-*

dinário (Life and Words: violence and the descent into the ordinary)(Das, 2020b) published by Editora Unifesp, directed by Cynthia Sarti, achieved rapid dissemination in the country. The book was immediately incorporated into various graduate courses syllabuses, and its publication was also the subject of a bibliographical essay by Adriana Vianna (2020).

With the book's publication in Brazil, along with the recent release of *Textures of the ordinary*, we felt encouraged to ask Veena Das for an interview, almost ten years after her last (and up to now only) interview made by Brazilian researchers (Das, 2012). Another incentive was the fact that Das had coordinated, throughout the year 2020, a major research project developed simultaneously in five countries, including Brazil, entitled "Implementation of COVID-19 related policies: implications for household inequalities across five countries." Veena Das had coordinated the project along with anthropologist Clara Han, her colleague at Johns Hopkins University and her partner in different endeavors. The project included Camila Pierobon in the coordination of the Brazilian team, together with our colleagues Paula Lacerda (UERJ) and Taniele Rui (UNICAMP).

The momentous launching of *Textures of the ordinary*, whose reception among anthropologists, philosophers and sociologists from different countries we were able to follow online, also stimulated us to propose an interview with her.[2] We were really and joyfully surprised when she not only accepted our proposal but also invited us for a preparatory meeting and made herself available to read pieces of our works before we met. Those were the early signs of Veena Das' enormous generosity throughout this process. Our preparatory conversation, held by video call, lasted about an hour and a half. It went through several subjects, such as what Das calls "devotion to the world" (cf. *Life and Words*); the theme of torture, about which she was writing at the time; the place of children in her writing; and, among many other themes, the relationship between anthropology and what she called "a taste for life".

The interview we conducted after this first conversation took place on January 30, 2021, again by video call, and lasted two and a half hours. The questions were sent out in advance, and the answers were later transcribed. A child irrupted into the interview, as the son of one of the interviewers briefly appeared on the screen; we noticed the interviewee's earrings, which allowed her to tell us about the meaning of the shirish flower in Sanskrit literature; she kindly offered to write something for us about the idea of "texture". Veena Das generously showed us her disposition for dialogue, welcoming and reflecting deeply on all the questions we proposed. After the interview was transcribed and went through a first edit, the interviewee worked carefully and thoroughly on the answers. What the reader has at hand, therefore, is the product not only of our meeting but also of the intense work invested by Veena Das in the interview. We opted to publish the original text in English in the present volume of *Socio-*

logia & Antropologia aiming at the widest possible circulation. We will soon make its version available in Portuguese as well.

In this volume of *Sociologia & Antropologia*, the reader will also find a Portuguese translation of Veena Das' precious essay "Two plaits and a step in the world: a childhood remembered." The essay was first published in an Indian collection of essays in homage to André Beteille (Das, 2009) and the Portuguese translation was done by Bruno Gambarotto.[3] In addition to the interview and to Das' essay, the present issue of the journal also includes four unpublished articles by Brazilian anthropologists Ceres Víctora, with Patrice Shuch and Monalisa Siqueira; Cynthia Sarti; Camila Pierobon; and Adriana Vianna. The papers reflect on several themes, such as long-lasting relationships in ethnographic research; ethnographic data produced in and about the coronavirus pandemic; and research trajectories within the anthropological discipline, all of them in frank dialogue with the work of Veena Das. Ceres Víctora, Patrice Schuch and Monalisa Siqueira reflect on ordinary ethics and forms of life during the pandemic. Víctora was a visiting researcher at Johns Hopkins Anthropology Department between 2010 and 2011, strongly influenced by Veena Das' work on social suffering. Cynthia Sarti, for her part, discusses the themes of pain and violence and the great impact of Das' work on her journey as a Brazilian scholar. Camila Pierobon presents us with dense reflections on family, betrayal, and skepticism. Adriana Vianna, in turn, discusses the intricate relationship between words and temporalities in ethnographic knowledge. Besides, the issue also contains a beautiful bibliographical essay by Bhrigupati Singh, Veena Das' partner, co-author and editor in articles, books, collections and research projects, as well as a book review of *Textures of the ordinary* written by Carolina Parreiras, who has taught courses on Veena Das' anthropology in Brazil.[4]

Letícia Ferreira Professor Veena, thank you very much again for your time and your attention. In our last meeting, as well as in the webinar for the launch of your new book, the relations between ethnography, biography and autobiography received a lot of attention. Could you tell us a bit more about how these forms of writing connect with each other and how this relates to the image of crab-like movements, which you used to describe your mode of thinking?

Veena Das These are very difficult questions that you have posed, and this one is particularly hard, I think I'm coming to this question from different perspectives. The first is that [for] a long time, anthropologists have postulated different moments in anthropological thinking. One moment is said to be that of being in the field, immersed in experiences; a second moment, when we come back and reflect on these experiences taking, the common set of concepts we

share as part of an anthropological community, and then applying these concepts to our material. The assumption is that we make our experiences available through these common concepts, writing within a disciplinary framework, right? Honestly, this whole process is not something about which I have sat down and thought out well. For me there are always many questions that arise at all these moments of fieldwork and writing, and as these questions get formed I need to learn many new things – or relearn what I thought I know. And what I read or learn can be from anywhere – from texts in many different languages, written in many different genres. Insights can come from philosophy, from anthropological texts, from economics, from political theory, from literature, right? I'm driven by circumstance, by how the questions come to pose themselves and not by disciplinary boundaries. To give you an example, sometimes it can happen that working in a team we get, let's say, very strong statistical results. Very good correlations between variables, but our team of colleagues can't figure out why we are finding these correlations or in other cases, not finding them. Then someone in the team might say, "well, this is a model, it is an if-then statement, may be our starting premises are wrong." There are others who will turn around and say to me "You're the anthropologist, you know people in the field. Tell us, when it doesn't cost anything to the doctor to give a prescription and a voucher that will get an x-ray to a patient with persistent cough why are they not prescribing it? We're subsidizing the tests. It costs them nothing. Then why are they not prescribing it?" And these colleagues sometimes think that if you go and talk to some doctors, it will become transparent to us why they are not doing this or that. But every anthropologist knows that this process is not so simple. We might talk to ten different doctors, and we will get ten different explanations. Then the general assumption is that within these variations we will find the patterns that matter. However, sometimes we do find patterns and sometimes we don't. And so, I guess what I mean by the fact that there is a way in which autobiography, ethnography and biography are joined together is that anthropological writing is also done within a form of life, thinking is not something happening outside a form of life. You're writing in response to a problem that gets thrown at you from the world you inhabit. So I don't ever think now I'm writing for my anthropological colleagues and now I'm writing for people in these places, and now I am writing for policy makers. It's true that some of the things I write, I would have to do more work on them to explain the ideas to my interlocutors in the field. I can imagine someone reading something from my text and saying: "I don't understand this. What are you trying to say over here?" But that can happen in any context. It can happen with my grandchildren. It can happen with a colleague. It can happen with a neighbour, or a friend in my fieldwork who wants to know why I am asking a particular question. So clearly texts will speak to very many different people in very many different ways. And for me, that's the excitement

of it. It's not a limitation that someone else can see an idea that I could not articulate well and take it in a different direction.

So, [going back to] autobiography, I think the person during this book launch you referred to, who emphasized this aspect of my work clearly was Michael Puett. And he kept saying that it's obvious [to him] that *Textures of the ordinary* has an autobiographical strain, is an autobiography. This is not because I'm using the first person, using the term 'I', not because there are some instances from my life which seep into the book. I'm equally willing to be trusting of the fact that it is from Rosaldo's (1989) experience of grief and sudden emergence of poetry in him that I can find something of my own experience, a resonance with something that I am trying to say. So I think it's in that sense that the book is written in these three modes; it is not that here are three genres – autobiography, ethnography, biography, which I take up and weave in a single text. It's that the text naturally comes to be so because that is how one lives one's life. And one lives one's life with others, and these others are people with whom you inhabit the world or you cohabit the world. It means that there are things, events, people, about whom I find it very difficult to speak from within my own life. Over time I have found the courage to speak because I found a right time to speak about them. And so, there is also the question [of the] reader – you have to write in a way that your reader is not hurt by what you're writing. By that observation. I don't mean that you cover up the truth with lies or something. But you have to learn something like what is tact, what is ordinary ethics, what is care, what is attention in relationship to those questions. There is a dominant model that when you come back from your field and you begin writing for the anthropological community and I've never felt that way. I've always felt that I'm writing for some reader who will find that the text speaks to him or her, wherever they are. And those to whom the text does not speak at all, I think I'm content for it to be aware that these other modes of thought [exist]. Not everybody has to like what I write or to find it interesting. There are a whole lot of other things in the world and that is just fine, yeah? So, I'm not out to convert people to think this is the proper way of thinking. If you have an interest, if you find something interesting in what I write, we can talk more. And the text wants to talk more to you, right? So that's the sense I have of where I'm going, and the feeling that my thinking is coming out of my life, which includes the life of so many others. I don't have any formulaic answers to this difficult question you asked. That's what I mean by crablike movements. Some thought or idea goes in one direction for years and then it can happen that I don't know how to move forward. And then, sometimes years later, that idea that was blocked comes back, and this can include thoughts from my childhood, for example, or something that is triggered in a classroom, or something that is triggered while walking in the street, or reading a book.

Adriana Vianna Thank you very much, Professor Veena. We all have fallen in love with your article about your childhood, "Two plaits and a step in the world: a childhood remembered" (Das, 2009) [translation to Portuguese in this special issue]. So we want to ask you about the desire for study and the pleasure of performance. They are two elements among many others that call our attention. Could you tell us more about how the pleasure of studying and performance marked your childhood and your education, impacting on your way of doing anthropology?

V.D. That's again something that's not that easy for me to speak about. On the one hand, I think that the child is somebody quite central to the way that I think but not in the sense of a conscious figuration of the child – this is the child [that] just seeps into my thinking or the sense that I share the experience that the world does not always appear decipherable to the child. You find this image from Wittgenstein and from Augustine, the child stealing bits of language to make sense of the world with which Wittgenstein opens *Philosophical investigations* (Wittgenstein, 1968). I think that children often know a lot that they don't always have language for. One of the things I say in *Textures*, a sentence you pick up very astutely, is that children know a lot about death. And that comes from the memory of a friend I had, and from the first time I visited her house. I realized that all the kids called their mother 'aunty.' Now, this is not very unusual in India. You can, if you're living in a joint family and you have older cousins who call your mother 'aunty,' pick up their language. In this case, she was a very loving mother, but she was their step-mother. Their mother had died, but the little ones didn't know that. There were two older siblings who did know it, and they tried to protect the younger siblings from that knowledge. This was not a down and out family, it was a family that had a relatively secure middle-class life but the kinship terms, gestured to making death present in an oblique way. And there was also the fact that people around me were dying all the time when I was young. Just look at my genealogy, which I've never fully problematized, but it's a very shallow genealogy. And the reason is that so many people during my childhood died. And not just because of the traumatic events of the Partition. A lot of people, a lot of young children died, because at that time the rates of child mortality were very high, and many women died in childbirth. For example, it was my mother and her sister who brought up their younger siblings because their mother died in childbirth. Then their youngest brother, who they more or less brought up as their "baby", died because there was no medicine for typhoid, which was not a curable disease at that time. Some people died of diabetes because it remained undiagnosed. Somebody died in the riots, for example, while trying to escape. So suddenly you look at your genealogy and you realize how empty it looks. I have only one picture of my grandfather. And I have no picture of my paternal grandfather. I have no

pictures of my grandmothers. On the other hand, I dream sometimes, quite a lot, where suddenly [I know] who somebody [is]. For example: I learned pretty late that I did have an elder sister who died when she was maybe less than a year old. I accidentally discovered what her name was, Indumati, and she became a character in a story that I was trying to write. As a child I would dream of being somewhere in Egypt, standing near the river, seeing that there's a little girl who is me. And she is watching from afar her sister, who's been having an affair – [*laughing*] this was when I was seven or eight, right? – this sister in the dream was having an affair with a stranger, and this stranger is now leaving. And so, this is in the moment when she's standing over there and she's watching them and she lets out a moan. There's nothing in my life, consciously, that would have produced that dream. And these kinds of dreams were maybe some sign in a way of how knowledge of loss is registered in the child, and I wonder how that kind of experience affected the work I do.

Part of my ideas of intimacy come from this kind of experience. In this kind of genealogy and its gaps, there were contingencies through which one particular relative might become close to you. So, in my case it was someone who had lost everything in the Partition, it was actually my father. [He] had become an ice cream seller in the streets, but he was a good Sanskrit scholar. So, my adoptive parents made a place for him in my life quite consciously. I didn't know he was my father, I just knew him as an 'uncle.' They made a place for him to come every day and teach me some Sanskrit. It was their way, of creating a space so that he could see his daughter. I must say I never had this great emotional link [with him], except through Sanskrit. I sometimes think that maybe the reason I loved Sanskrit texts might be because of that connection. I have no idea, apart from the intrinsic beauty of the texts as to what is the compulsion that makes me return to them. That's perhaps one kind of way I reclaim my past. The other kind of work I do in the slums is, perhaps, because of the fact that I'm much more comfortable in these places; I don't have to make any effort to be really comfortable in the slums in which I work. [Of course] there are all these bad smells and I find myself instinctively putting a handkerchief on my nose. Then I remove it, not wanting to convey any discomfort, because I know this, after all, is their home. But I don't know if this an intellectual inference. My body just knows how to be there, right? Now, as I get older my immunity is not so good so I can't go and eat everything they offer for fear of falling sick but for a long time when I was younger, I would eat anything that was offered regardless of whether it was clean, cooked in oil I could digest, carried by a street hawker, or bought from an open stall with flies hovering over the sweets. And that, I think, created a closeness so that they never felt looked down upon. Or they never felt that there was any strangeness that was difficult to overcome among us. I mean, you just were part of that street or that bazaar, you became a part of that life. It doesn't mean that they told

you everything they knew, or that there weren't events that remained hidden, or that there weren't hints of obscure things there. But there is a difference between that kind of obscurity because everyone has their secrets and there are things that are not open to view within a form of life; as an anthropologist I never felt that I am here in this street or house to just collect data and I'm going to go back to my own society after this phase is over. Being there and returning again and again gives one a feel for everyday tragedies, small disappointments. For example, there is a scholarship scheme that ISERDD, the research and advocacy I work with in Delhi, facilitates with some family money we have contributed. It makes it possible for some kids who need to get tuition to be able to pass their exams. I know that such small acts don't solve any big structural problems. There are people who would say, "well, you're actually just putting a Band-Aid over their problems. The real problem is that their schools don't function properly." And I understand that criticism, but that extra tuition is very important for a particular child who can improve his or her prospects a tiny bit if they manage to pass their exam. Sometimes they are able to use the opportunity to go forward, sometimes not. Some child, very brilliant, one you have helped – you feel they should have committed to completing a college degree, but they are not able to do so because sometimes there are demands upon them; sometimes there are temptations of immediate rewards: "I can get this much money now, why should I wait another three years within a very uncertain market?" I think I savour the experience of improvisation, of doing something rather than nothing, trying to meet whatever the demands put on me are; but knowing that you don't necessarily succeed, but still thinking "OK, maybe last time I didn't succeed, maybe this time I will."

But also, for all my failures, I feel a fierce pride in the achievements of many kids and also in everything my family enabled me to do. I often get in trouble with authorities but I can't stand somebody giving me advice about finding a patron. So many times, very well-meaning friends have said, "why don't you, on this matter, go and talk to your dean or your president or your vice-chancellor," and I'm like, "there's no way I'm going to do that." Not because of any great moralism or moral stance, and I'm not judgmental about those who think that they can get something important done through those channels. But for me, it's one of the hardest things to think of getting any kind of favour from anyone. And I don't know from where this sensibility comes, because I'm sure I've depended on a lot of favours [*laughing*]. Like as a kid there was this pressing question of, say, not having a winter coat, for example, and getting a hand-me-down from relatives and yet never being offended by that. As an adult working with poor people, these experiences of privation educated me. I can figure out how to offer a gift. It is such an ordinary issue, but a truly delicate one. You cannot say to a parent "Don't you see I'm willing to pay for your child's tuition, so why are you not supporting him in going to school?" And sometimes

you even have to teach a child to say "now don't use this opportunity to just put your parents down. True that you're getting a school education, and they're not literate. But that's absolutely no reason for you to think you are superior to them." This is the mutual pedagogy which goes on between the children and me. Cavell, in his autobiography, [talks about] his wound in relation to his father, because there's a moment when he says "I realize that it was not that my father wanted me dead, it was that he wanted me never to have been born." I've never had that experience. So even in the worst of circumstances, I have not felt that there is somebody who finds my existence unbearable. And I think that [this] is what really allows me to think about autobiography as a source, a spring in a certain sense from which certain ways of thinking emerge, but I can't say that they emerge through any conscious strategies. Why do I feel compelled to respond to certain things? I think it's very strongly tied with what I kept losing and finding again and I cannot turn my back to that past.

Camila Pierobon I think you answered one of our questions about children. I would just ask if you would like to say something about the importance of children in your work. When I read *Textures of the ordinary*, for me it's really interesting to see that they appear in all the chapters. Would you like to add something about that?

V.D. [The 8th] chapter, on this little girl who was raped, had to be done with a great deal of delicacy and caution, because I'm not the one who is having to face the question of what threats might those I am talking to, be facing. I can give only limited support and in that particular case, I tried to remain very much under the radar. [The] chapter had to be written in a certain way by which I privilege what happens in the court because that's public knowledge. I could not draw from everything I know about her or with her. There will be a time when maybe she will write about her own experiences because she is now starting to write short stories about herself. And these may not circulate widely, may be not even outside her house or her street. But on the other hand, I've noticed very interesting small shifts in the way others relate to her. She's a very courageous girl. There was just no question about her courage: the way that she stood in court and was not intimidated by the sight of this man sitting there who had brutalized her in that cruel way. Nobody had to teach her anything. Nobody had to say to her "be brave." She knew what had happened to her and she was just telling in court what had happened to her. Compare that to this little boy in *Affliction* (Das, 2015), who is now 29 years old. When I go to Delhi we meet up in a café for a coffee or something like that. Usually I meet people just there in the area, but in this case, he likes the idea that he as [an] adult, is having this date with me outside, in a café and so on. But there's something very important, very interesting that has shifted. Earlier, our conversation would go something like this: I would

ask "so now what's happening?" and he would say "well I started on this and that, but I couldn't continue", or "I had this very good job and I'm going to do great"; then next time he would say "oh you know, it couldn't be continued because I got a bit tired of it," or he would fall in love with the wrong person and get beaten up, or something of that kind would happen, right? And last time, now that he has a kind of the sense of himself, at the age of twenty-nine, he has a wife, he has a little daughter, he feels like the community looks up to him because he got a reasonably good job. He said: "I want to tell you something." We were just leaving the café and he wanted to show me his [new] motorcycle and to take a photo with me. And then he suddenly said: "aunty I have to tell you something." I said "yeah…?" And he said "you know when someone is falling – it's about that." He was stumbling as he said "It's true that I couldn't complete the kind of things you wanted me to do because… (pause) you know in school you provided me with books." He was talking about the time when I used to spend the summer months in Delhi, I would go find him, drag him to my place and "do tuition", i.e. make him mug up lessons from his texts, and learn tables, and do sums, so that he would pass his exam. Perhaps remembering all this, he said "I know you did all that for me." "But", he continued, "what you did not realize was that I was going to school hungry every day." I recalled that his father had been very opposed to his schooling. And so, his father would just set up tasks for him to do before school started, and in a rush to complete those tasks, the child didn't get time to eat. It was such a revealing moment for me and then he said "but, you know, what any person needs when things are bad times is one person, just one person who will…" – he used this gesture of extending his hand – "who will stretch out their hand to you." He said in flowery Hindi: "just one person's support and then you can make something of your life." I'm not saying he found spectacular success or he is like others who found some paths forward to better education, better jobs. But I have many examples of that kind. There was another boy who we supported, whose sister had to discontinue school because their mother was chronically ill and the daughter was the only one providing care to her mother. Their mother died but by then his sister was already twenty-five years old and, believe it or not, he went to her school, he talked to the principal, he talked to his sister, and said "you have to go back to school." And his sister was bewildered "I'm twenty-one! Everyone is like kids of, what, eleven or twelve." He said "It doesn't matter. I'll talk to the teacher. It doesn't matter. You have to go and finish school." These are small successes perhaps. There are people who devote their lives to working in the slums or among the poor, helping them, and they are angels of a kind. There are lots of things that I really admire about them. But for me the force of my actions just comes from the imperative to say *this* person and I, we are in this relationship with each other and a lot flows from that – they are not my informants. And I think *Textures* tries to bring that attention to the particular as the basis of ethnography.

Cynthia Sarti Everything is very linked and we would like you to talk about gender. In your previous interview with Brazilian researchers (Das, 2012), you said something about how gender is implicated in the production of knowledge, but not as an *a priori*. This is very clear in your work because women are mainly your interlocutors. But also, it's clear when you recover the ideas of [Stanley] Cavell, which state that gender is not something philosophers look for, but it comes to them. Can you tell us more about this problem of gender as something implicated in the production of knowledge? And how do women and men appear in your work? What is it to talk about men and what is it to talk about women?

V.D. I would add children to that. Children have been very important, not because I sought out children, but because I can't go into the area without a whole lot of them just following me around and saying "what is happening?", "why didn't you come earlier?", "did you go to my school?". For a while, they [used to say], "you have to come to school". It was a very strange experience because the principal of the local school had mistaken me for a local politician. Apparently, I resembled her, and I did not do very much to correct him. The principal and teachers were all charging huge amounts of money to the children who had dropped out of school for some reasons and wanted readmission. And I kind of offered something that was an incentive, shall we say, or a face-saving for the principal because the government policy was to offer free education and he was violating it by charging them. I said to him, "well, I know how deprived your school is." And he jumped at that opening, "just look at it, the children don't have anything to sit on, I don't even have a [place to] keep my papers in, right?" In response, I immediately went and bought mats for the children and a small cupboard because I couldn't see myself giving him a bribe. I could donate things for the school but I wasn't going to bribe him for taking the children in. But the children sensed that it was a hidden bribe... [*laughing*] Suddenly [I realized] the demography of the children in school coming from this area changed because the recruitment of children went up, and everyone was supposedly born on the 15th of August (Independence Day!). You know [*laughing*] it was very unlikely that everybody was born on the 15th of August, which is the Independence Day of India, right? But the Principal was not attuned to this irony. The children sensed what was happening and [the principal] would become aggressive with them, [and the children] would then say "would you mind coming in and paying a visit to the principal?"

So, the children are very important, but women... I was intellectually very moved when I read in Cavell (1981) on how he constructed the two different genres of films to demonstrate his picture of scepticism. One is the comedy of remarriage in his book *Pursuits of happiness*, where his question is, can a couple commit themselves to a future together despite the inevitable disap-

pointments that every relationship will bring? And the other genre is [the one] he creates around, [the] set of women who cannot make themselves intelligible in the world of men and must die or retreat to a world of women. There's an unforgettable moment from *Letter from an unknown woman* where Cavell says that the woman has come back to this man for whom she had tried to invent herself. And he's very happy to see her and he says "Let me go and make you a drink." As she waits he asks, "are you lonely out there?" in a flirtatious way. And she replies "yes, very lonely" looking at the camera, and hence at us and then when he comes into the room, she has left, for what was for him a mere dalliance, was, for her, a last chance to offer her life to him. We learn that the letter is signed by a dead woman, ghost written.

For Cavell, skepticism is gendered. A way out of doubt for a man who wonders how do I know this child is mine, is to simply trust the woman, accept the child in the concrete give and take of life. For the woman, the problem of skepticism is "can I make myself intelligible to this other?." And Cavell links this difference to the male and the female regions of the self. So even in his autobiography you see that his struggle with intelligibility is that he cannot make himself intelligible to his mother, or his mother is not able to make herself intelligible to him.

With his father Cavell experiences a wound caused by the inability of the father to accept the son's separate existence. But the son also knows the envy that runs in the immigrant father who's going to be stuck in that position of being a pawn breaker, who has a philosopher son whose life he can only very vaguely decipher. So, the question comes back to Cavell on the gendered nature of skepticism, which he said was a traumatic discovery for him. It was a traumatic discovery because the issue had always been before him: he had written on Dora, he had written on Freud, he had undergone psychoanalysis himself. And yet something failed to impress itself on him earlier and he says that gender came as a traumatic discovery for him. There is a very interesting question here whether one can think about gender in relation to this way of asking "can I trust this knowledge?," "can I trust that this child is mine?" Cavell says this is a male doubt, versus the question "can I make myself intelligible?" And for that he says all that you need is someone to say to you, not a big dramatic "I believe you" – but just "whatever you're saying, I can repeat it in a tone of affirming it. And just make you comfortable in your own words."

I had a very good friend and interlocutor, Audrey Cantlie, who was at SOAS in London, and had done fieldwork in Assam. She came from this very upper class family. She was a superb, intimate friend of mine. I remember that she had written a book on psychoanalysis, which, for various reasons no publisher was willing to accept. In this book she showed how her words were constantly overwritten by the greater authority of her husband who was a psychoanalyst, a very powerful man, but this overwriting of her words was not just

in the public context. It was also just an aspect of the ordinary for her. For instance, if she was trying to say something, her husband would immediately correct her and say "no, this is not how it was." And that form of power is what for Foucault becomes the power of correction and [control]. It is invested in the psychiatrist but it is also invested in the way that Cavell thinks about the notion of voice – when one's words might be constantly overwritten and so one fails to recognize the voice as one's own voice.

As I said earlier, I love Sanskrit texts. But every Sanskrit text – [for example], drama – will have components of Sanskrit and components of what is known as Prakrit, which is a container language, so to say, which is put in counterpoint to Sanskrit and is often the language spoken by women. It has four or five languages within it, more sometimes. And within that set there are divisions as to which kind of Prakrit will be spoken by women and which kind of Prakrit by children or Jain monks, that kind of a division. I realized recently that all through my study of Sanskrit drama, I had read Prakrit through its translation in Sanskrit. Because it was obligatory in every Sanskrit text to have what is called a *chaya* text, which was the Sanskrit rendering of the Prakrit, seen as its shadow (*chaya*). This text was meant for the reader, but not for the performer. I then realized, that, theatre being something which is performed, the audience would experience the performance in their own vernacular Prakrit and in spoken Sanskrit. And so you get a vision here of how one inhabits multiple languages, but also how one inhabits the question of gender. And then I begin to think "yes, of course there are Prakrits spoken by women and other Prakrits spoken by lower castes, or by Jains, or Turkish sounding words in Sanskrit drama spoken by characters depicted as foreigners." Steeped in a multiplicity of sounds every audience must have experienced the differences.. As it happens, when I was a college student, I acted in a number of college level English plays, but also in Sanskrit plays. And I loved the rendering in Prakrit, which appears in the drama texts, or in examples in grammar, as also in everyday forms of communication where a certain distortion of Sanskrit was allowed. Here is where gender finds you, right? It wasn't that I set out to say "Well, let me see the place of women in Sanskrit drama." Gender finds you there. It shows, in a way, the power of how you can pose that question of gender with regard to knowledge.

C.S. We would like to ask something about coming of age. It's different when you tell and retell a story when you were young. When you retell a story many years later. What changes there?

V.D. My picture of retelling is not that something was told at Time A and now it's being told at Time B. I think people are actually remoulding and polishing and changing and revisiting their memories and their narratives all the time. This happens over continuous time, not at discrete time intervals. That's why

I don't like the concept of afterlife because then it will look as if the violence is over now, and then we have its afterlife." Some of that showing in narration of events happens because sometimes when I am relating something [that was] said to me, [by] women like Manjit or Asha, I realized that I was in my twenties [when I talked to them]. And so [they] must have been seeing somebody different than what I am now. A lot of women did have this sense [of] not telling too much or not knowing how to say things to you, because young unmarried girls are not always told everything. This is where this question of ethnography gets completely reversed, because they are the ones protecting you when you are young from certain events or knowing about a hurtful past. But it's also true that these relationships develop. You then realize that there is a certain sense of time as not just two discrete points over a line. And so the retelling is not something like a narrative coming to an end, and then again being retold – it's a continuous moulding that tends to happen, and that's what I think I was trying to say in *Textures*. That it's an inhabitation over parts of life that have sometimes become ruins or as happens in relationships, some affect has worn off. When Cavell talks about the inevitable disappointments in a relationship: the possibility of having a future together is in the light of this kind of disappointment. So, our commitment to each other may simply be that of agreeing to have a future together. I'm not saying that this is always ennobling or that this renewal depends on something big as forgiveness. I was trying to say that very often, say, in the work on abandonment in anthropology, there is the sense that there is this moment of abandonment which is the sum total of what is the truth of a relationship. What I've often seen is that abandonment is not very easy for people. They won't just say "Well, this is not working out, fine, I can just walk out of it, right?" It can happen that they can't go on with the burden of caring or sustaining a relation. There's an exhaustion of endurance or something of that kind. I have this very moving story, something in it just hit me by its sheer unpretentious generosity. There's this woman whose story I rework in *Textures*, whose son, after much family opposition, had got married to a girl of his liking. The girl was having an affair with one of her own brothers-in-law, so after the wedding she stole the jewellery of [her own] mother and of his mother-in-law and she ran away with her lover. Both her families (natal and conjugal) were furious. They tried to register a complaint at the police station; the policeman, of course, used that as an opportunity to extract a bribe out of them, but because they had gone through somebody influential in the neighbourhood, the bribe he asked for was not excessive. The policeman said something like this: "You're lucky that she hasn't filed a case against you when she could have accused you of something, like making unreasonable demands for dowry." It's not that women are always victims, right? Some harbour impossible, clandestine desires for wealth, for Bollywood type romance. [The couple] had now a lot of money, and [because of] this fantasy of the poor that [they] can

live as well as any rich person, they blew up all the money in a year. Then he abandoned her, she had become pregnant, he went back to his own wife, her parents took her in with the proviso that they would shelter her "until the child is born." They told her "We can't let you stay beyond that time because once the child is born everyone will know you ran away with someone and it would just ruin our reputation." The mother-in-law who had cut all connections with this girl described to me how she was sitting in her house one day and she could hear someone sobbing outside... The houses in this street have three to four steps to climb and then you open the door and you get in. She could hear this crying from someone sitting on the steps. She opened the door slightly and peeked out to find that it was her daughter-in-law who was sitting there with a baby in her arms. And, of course, she had known all along that her daughter-in-law had given birth to a baby girl born of her lover: "I shut the door." And then she reopened it after a while because she said [that she] couldn't bear the fact that this baby might be somebody who then might fall into the streets and the daughter-in-law might be forced to become a prostitute. All these possible scenarios ran into her mind as she was listening to the sobbing; so she just took in her daughter-in-law and the baby.

This is a story for me of amazing generosity, which she's not even thinking of as generosity. She's saying [that she] just couldn't bear the baby crying, [she] just had to take her in. Of course, she created all these other [justifications] as she related these events to me: "If it had been a boy, I would not have done it, it is because it's a girl that I felt that she really needed my protection." And then after nearly a year when we met again, she said: "No, I'm not very happy with the situation." "Why are you not happy with it?" "Because I think my daughter-in-law feels so obliged to me. She is constantly running around doing things for me. I just want her to be naturally there, right? To do things or not do things, depending on how she feels about it."

You've asked me what I mean by texture: this is what I mean by texture. To say that these are really the way that the surface gets defined through these very sensory qualities, where this woman is not taking this decision to take in the baby because she feels it is morally right to do it, but because there is this sensorium. Precisely because of that, it's not a ground for saying you could count on everybody's behaviour being similar. There are an equal number of people in these neighborhoods who might say: "The girl deserved to be killed or abandoned because she had really sullied the reputation of the family", if she was a somewhat upper caste woman. But in the slums, I feel that there is a lot of violence, [but] there are also a lot of ways in which people do those kinds of things beyond all expectations, and time becomes very important over here. I relate this story in response to this kind of excitement about abandonment in theory, when the moment of abandonment stands for, "This is how patriarchal the family in India is" and so on. And these scholars don't realize

how difficult it is for people to reach the point of abandoning the person, because they can't put up with this situation, or with a woman who cannot control her anger, or a child, or older person who demands constant care, they can't bear to do the work it takes, they can't endure it any more. As an anthropologist, I feel that the texture of such events woven into everyday life has to be shown. Because otherwise we jump too quickly into assuming that there is a natural way this would end up, almost a teleology leading to inevitable abandonment of undesirable family members.

C.S. You talk a lot about the dialogue you have with philosophy, literature and even Sanskrit, which is your area of education. Is there anything else you want to say about this dialogue, especially in philosophy, and how this broadens our way of seeing the world and understanding it in an anthropological way?

V.D. Well, there are two ambitions here. Though I was always an avid reader of philosophical texts and engaged Wittgenstein in my work there was absolutely no reason to expect that any philosophers would have noticed anything that I write. It was quite accidental that certain philosophers became very interested in anthropology and in what I was writing. And in that development Stanley Cavell became very important for me – he was one of the persons I dedicated *Textures of the ordinary* to – and there I say ungrammatically that "In your writing I am existed". I felt that that in Cavell's recognition I found myself become alive. He didn't know me at all when through some fortunate accident he was asked to comment on a paper of mine as a referee, and, again, there was no reason why he would have ever agreed to do so, since he knew nothing about me. He had a certain fascination for Indian cinema, but he also had a lot of diffidence about what Indian philosophy or literature was about. He recognized that I was not looking to philosophy for any kind of theory for anthropology. I just wasn't doing that, I didn't think we needed a foundation or a theory to stand on. I was looking for a kind of partnership, a companionship, with philosophy [and] more to find a way to address questions like "how do I know this?" Or when I say "this is the object", do I really know how I come to think of the object as *this* and not *that* in this setting? I think it helped me to read philosophy just for my own pleasure. But there were also a lot of false claims about Indian philosophy being made within European philosophy. Cavell (1988) had the conviction that philosophy harbours a desire of violence against the ordinary, making it into a form of knowledge that became somewhat incomprehensible to many. My interest was in particular philosophers and not in philosophy in general. That I think is important for me. [Many] times people think that Wittgenstein is so exotic, so difficult and so strange, so why do I feel this attraction? But coming from some immersion in Indian philosophical tradition, Wittgenstein's questions were not strange at all. [The] questions about

doubt are very central [in Indian philosophy], and I think Cavell sometimes mistook their sense of doubt in Indian philosophy as maybe just sophistry. But when we started talking about these matters and about Emerson, he sensed that this form of doubt (not the same as skepticism in his formulation) was embedded in the forms of life in India. So, it was not just an epistemology in the sense of enumerating the formal conditions of knowing. I mean there are times where some renowned Indian philosophers get frightened of where their reason is leading them. To give you an example: the Buddhists are unafraid of working with idea that anything that can be divided into parts is basically just a [conceptual] entity. It doesn't have ontological reality. But then there is, of course, the fact that a chariot cannot exist within this logic, its parts can, right? But we also know that a chariot can carry you as a mode of transport? Some of the Indian philosophers would say: "don't go there." Because we know, this issue is not going to be resolved. The Buddhist bravely tried to resolve it by making this distinction between conventional truth and ultimate truth, and sometime exchanges with Buddhism were crucial for those within a kind of Hindu imagination to develop their own notions of existence. But it's not at all strange for them to entertain the idea that inexistence is a very important part of existence itself and that reality cannot simply be equated to actuality. Or that you cannot make propositions about non-existent things.

There are very good, very fascinating philosophers who tried to foster conversations among those who wrote and read in Sanskrit and contemporary philosophers writing in English. It's an important experimentation but part of the problem, for example with Indology, is that those who are great scholars of Sanskrit read no vernacular Indian languages. Many of them think that such actions as translation were inaugurated in Europe. Right now, I'm writing [a] paper with two of my colleagues where we started by asking: why did so many reputed European scholars think that they're the ones who first translated Sanskrit texts? [We have] very early translations of Sanskrit texts in Persian, translations in Tibetan, the entire corpus of the philosopher Nagarjuna, who wrote in Sanskrit – was recuperated by processes of translation by Chinese and Tibetan monks. There are texts in Sanskrit which have been recovered because of methods of oral transmission evolved over centuries. For instance, segments of texts were memorized by segments of particular lineages whose responsibility it was to memorize these segments and transmit them without any alteration. And there were other cases such as the famous plays by the poet Bhasa, which were based on a single episode in the Mahābhārata, and were performed in Sanskrit in villages in Kerala. These texts were lost but were recreated by contemporary theatre artists or scholars by getting people to re-enact the dialogs. Clearly the audiences were erudite enough to sustain these performances.

One would have thought anthropology would be the proper home for this kind of dialogue among different philosophical, aesthetic and performance traditions. It would help us interrogate our own concepts, right? As an example, in *Textures of the ordinary* one of the things I tried to do with regard to reading of the classics [was to question] in Evans-Pritchard's (1956) [writings] on religion, why it was so obvious to him that the Nuer god was a god and the Azande god was not a god? I argued that he smuggles in the discussion, aspects of Christian normativity under the guise of an anthropological concept. I'm not saying this in a spirit of resentment. I realize how difficult the apparatus of Sanskrit texts is and I realize that Indian scholars should have done much more to make this kind of thinking much more available. But knowledge making is also constrained by different kinds of exercise of power: the work on concepts from Sanskrit was not easily publishable; even today, when you try to publish something like that there will be somebody sitting over you and saying "Do you know what? This is not really anthropology." It is very difficult to [break through] this barrier, and I really struggle with the fact that a lot of my truly creative students don't initially get jobs in [well-known universities] because their work is not easily recognizable within the grid. Ultimately, they do get to be where they want to be in academic jobs because they come to love academia, or ideas, but it's kind of hard because they ultimately do end up saying: "You trained us in a way that people don't recognize what we do as anthropology." And that's kind of difficult to absorb because I am not paying the price for the innovations they engage in. There's somebody younger paying a price for having to carry certain ideas forward, right? In addition, there is just so much gaming of what counts as knowledge in the sense that my own university is obsessed with rankings how many citations? How many books did you publish this year? How many are in the press? You know, you can make all the right gestures to say "Of course we are not just saying counting is important," but we know that there is a lot of gaming which happens because people are not willing to accept the fact that, yes, there will be failures. You can't get everything right the first-time round: if people are really doing risky research, expect some failures. And don't punish them because they tried to do this in ways that they were not sure of the success of their experiments. So, I think those are the kind of things that we really need to think more about. You have another question [asking] how we think about different traditions in contemporary anthropology? That's a really important issue.

In India, this is an obsession: what is Indian anthropology? How do we do anthropology or sociology here in India? How [do we really approach Indian anthropology] et cetera, et cetera, which I think is a very healthy way of thinking, except that it settles too easily for what is "Indian." And one has to say "Okay, we need to really rethink that." It would be a grave mistake to think that Sanskrit texts are the exclusive repository of what is Indian. There are fantas-

tic questions that have emerged through the study social movements which don't find a place necessarily in texts, there is Dalit literature as also texts in Persian, Prakrit, Pali, and vernacular languages which is in dialogue with Sanskrit texts.

The affinity I have with Brazilian authors like Mariza Peirano (1991, 1998), is because she was able to pose these questions in new ways. For a long time, I used to think "Its okay, even if there are ten people in my society who will be interested in such questions, that's good enough." And I still think so. I'm not in need of finding affirmation by attracting huge numbers of followers. I think one has sought to say something because of the pressure on thought, and someone, somewhere will need to carry some ideas forward. I was very lucky in my teacher, Professor M. N. Srinivas who was a student of Evans-Pritchard and Radcliffe-Brown at Oxford, but also studied with Ghurye at Bombay University. He was not so tolerant with every student of his, but with me he was somehow very open to the fact that there was something very idiosyncratic in what I was doing. He encouraged my experiments. On the one hand, he would worry about me: "Anthropology is about actual fieldwork, and you're not doing fieldwork, how will you tell people this is anthropology?" But then he would also say that Radcliffe-Brown had forbidden him to read such scholars as Bachofen or McLennan because of the problems with "conjectural history", and he said: "You should go and read all of that" [*laughing*]. Kind of quite interesting to see that.

In a recent book published by Polity Press called *Slum acts* (Das, 2022). I have tried to see how documents acquire a legal status in terror trials, and the person whose book has been most influential for me is somebody called Wahid [Abdul Wahid Shaikh] who was the only accused to be acquitted in these huge Bombay terror trials, but who wrote, very courageously, a book on torture (Shaikh, 2017). I wrote a blog post to make that kind of thinking in vernacular available in anthropological theory, to say why this is a book of utmost, profound importance (Das, 2019). Not because it tells you a horror story but because it's a pedagogic text. So, I think there's a lot of work to be done in making anthropology talk to these kinds of texts.

I have also worked with one of the slum dwellers who was educated only to Grade 8th, the one who in *Textures* appears as Sanjeev Gupta, to write an article which he wrote in Hindi and it was published in a national daily in India. There was a nation-wide anti-corruption movement taking place in India and he asked me to summarize for him what newspapers were writing on this, and his reaction to my summary was "This is a way of side-lining the poor." He was not at all taken in by the rhetoric of purifying the polity. That is why he would ask me: "Tell me, what are people writing about this movement in English media? About democracy, and about slums, and about us?" Because of this rise of the new political party in Delhi, a lot of people from various top universities were writing in newspapers. And I would summarize op-eds for him and

he'd say: "They've got it all wrong." So then I asked: "Why don't you write something to tell us how you think about it?" He responded: "But nobody will publish it." I said, probably, but let's try. So he wrote a short piece in Hindi on how he saw the issue of corruption and democracy; I translated it and then I managed to find a connection to an editor in a national daily and they agreed to publish it. It's not just academia in universities that blocks knowledge from these kinds of sources. It is very difficult to find venues for publication for this kind of writing. So after [the article] came out, Sanjeev Gupta was very pleased for about two days. His photograph was there in a national daily, his ideas were there for the English-speaking big professors and so on! I congratulated him and inquired "People in your party must be very pleased," because he was a party worker. And he said "Well, yes." I probed further: "So what did they say? Did they congratulate you?" He retorted "They said, oh so, you're trying to act as a big hero, huh?" Meaning "Why have you bypassed the authority of the top people in the Party?" You have to realize what it means for them to be able to speak, to be able to write, to negotiate these things every day. So for me, it's not just a question of ploughing through Sanskrit texts, that are a very important resource for me, or Prakrit texts, or vernacular texts – but also find the way that the apparatus of thought from many of these texts seeps into the lives of people. I am full of curiosity about what kinds of texts are being produced through writing, lectures, political slogans or anything like that, as people are reflecting on their own conditions in very compelling ways.

A.V. We could go to so many different questions now, but I'll go to the details again, and allegories. We would like to know a bit more about the ethical and aesthetic implications of how you deal with fragments, allegories, details, the way you choose to not conclude things so fast, or not put things in a straight framework.

V.D. That's where the question of texture becomes very important, because for me the way I think about texture is through the actions of weaving and knitting, you know, these are the things that trigger the picture of texture in my writing. And they come from the idea that the frame is not the rigid frame which keeps the pictorial space inside and the world outside. This notion of the frame is in any case, an innovation of the renaissance. Other experiences of painting are different, or [even] the experience of the image when you would move around it, you would touch it, you would offer something to it, you would pray before it, and so on and so forth. In a museum, a painting is bound in a frame and I stand before it and watch it; my eyes move around it but I stand still, may be changing my position slightly, right? And there are modern painters in many places [thinking in terms of], say, installations and trash art who experiment with the earlier ways of moving around. In India contemporary artists take

inspiration from many traditions borrowing from wherever they feel like. Whether this is folk tradition, whether this is classical Western painting, whether it is Indian innovations with miniature painting, for example. The experiments with frame come from thinking of the frame as something like a weaver's loom. The frame is… woven into the depiction. And thus, the writing or art and the world are not separated. They are just part of each other, so to say.

L.F. Yes, the writing and the world are not separated. I think that the question about silence comes just at the right moment. This is an aspect of your work that called our attention in Brazil, and that is commented on by many scholars. Would you talk a bit more on how we can think of silences in anthropological texts and how we can think about the experience of those moments where it's impossible to go ahead, when you have to stop?

V.D. The stance I have is: I am happy to leave things in the middle. I think there is a paragraph somewhere in the preface [*of Textures*] saying [*consulting book*]: "There are some relations I made with people, places, and texts that are marked by much greater intensity than others – but there was also those with whom I did not have the mental fortitude to stay with or who faded from my life and work because of accidents of fate" (Das, 2020a: xi). So there are many things that you actually do to leave something in the middle. Throughout the preface, I talk about the fact that "The love of anthropology may yet turn out to be an affair in which when I reach bedrock I do not break through the resistance of the other. But in this gesture of waiting, I allow the knowledge of the other to mark me" (Das, 2020a: xii). And then chapter 4 ends this way: "At one point in Endgame, Clove says, 'The end is terrific,' to which Hamm responds: 'I prefer the middle.' And Cavell has much of importance to say on being an eschatologist versus being just in the middle in this scene when finding a cure for being on earth is not the issue, perhaps enduring this condition is. I stop at this point" (Das, 2020a: 147). [And] chapter 9, in which I read Wittgenstein's (2020) *Remarks on Frazer's "Golden Bough,"* ends with something like the idea of stopping in the middle: "For now, I leave this chapter with the idea…"

I think there's often this imperative to show that you have mastered something and so it stops us from saying that this is how far I can go and I'm not able to go forward. And what's really exciting is that you're not necessarily the person who will pick up the unfinished thought again. It may be somebody else who will allow your thought to be supplemented by making that problem their own. I supervised a student in Lausanne, Joséphine Stebler, who worked with children and introduced totally new pedagogic methods in elementary school with children, a majority of who did not have French as their first language. Or they had the idiolect of Rwandan French and were learning the Swiss French. And she writes on this child in *Life and words*, the one who is

mute, as I describe a scene when he begins to enact how his father was hung from a tree during the anti-Sikh violence in 1984. And as the child was enacting this scene, how his face became a canvas on which the memory of every emotion that passed on his father's face as he was being dragged to his death was mirrored, while the child's hands became enacted the frenzied movement of the hands of the killers showing how they dragged him to the tree put a noose around him and lifted him up to hang there. Many years later there, were some people who kept asking me: "why don't you go back and find him and talk to him." And somebody else did write a scene in a theatre on this episode. But I don't have it in me to be able to do that. And I have to figure out why that memory still paralyzes me. But I can't figure it out, right now, you see?

Just one year ago I had a conversation with my youngest son who at the time of the riots against the Sikhs [1984] was probably four. I had written about these two young girls who I brought to my house after their mother committed suicide. One of them would not talk to anybody except him. He vaguely remembers her, but when this occupation [of the Capitol by Donald Trump supporters on January 6th 2021] in Washington happened, he said to me and – he's a forty-year-old now, he's a professor, he works on artificial intelligence and so on – and he said: "I was terrified by the idea of the mob." And then he was trying to remember the time of the riots in 1984 in India. He only remembered fragments of those events, but he remembered his sense of foreboding because I was receiving death threats and I was very scared that I had put my childrens' lives at risk. These events affected my three children in different ways, but he said that all he remembered was my sense of panic – [what] if the children went up on the roof, for example? Absolutely forbidden for them to go to the roof because then they would be visible from afar. Absolutely forbidden to take an auto rickshaw, even if they had to wait for hours for a bus, they would wait for the bus and not take an auto rickshaw. Because sometimes the killer might be the one who is driving the auto rickshaw. And it had an impact on how he thinks about mobs, and how he thinks of fairness, and how he thinks about justice – not in the way I think, because it's a different way of thinking. But these concerns took root in his life. I similarly have students who pick something like that and make it into a project of their own. If you see any work done by my students, you will never find a single way of doing research or thinking. And this is because I feel I show them where my ignorance lies. And so they are encouraged to pick up something and say "This is what *I* might do with it." It's not like I don't have the courage to tell them "This idea seems right and that wrong," but I'm truly blocked sometimes in not knowing what that would entail. I don't know how to go forward. I can give my students whatever I can, then they need to take their own thinking forward in their own way.

In all these senses, I think it's again a question of knowledge and I've always told my students, I'm really not interested in the "aha" moment. In the

American academy, it's the sort of thing that just presses on you. [They] say "Oh yes this is very good, but what about the "aha" moment?" And for me it's a question of what are you willing to commit your life to? So, when Joséphine [Stébler] wrote about these children, she actually raised this amazingly interesting question: what would connect the life of this kid in this slum, and the dramatic enactment that he does, with what she's doing? [And] in her writing she evoked this four-year-old Rwandan kid who for the first time reads a whole picture book, and when she reaches the end, she's like "ooh-la-la!" [*laughing*] And just what would connect them? And she said: what connects them is that children are used to taking different roles, they are enacting different possibilities of life. And so, although this was an absolutely terrifying moment [for one of the two children], and [for the other], the four-year-old, it was not, Josephine said what's connecting [them] is the fact that their form of life is a human form of life in which one plays with different possibilities. Now, you recognize that I think I missed that. I know that I was trying to get to saying this is the human form of life, but I missed the intermediate steps that she was able to take.

I would say the same for a lot of those who found their own ways of taking thought forward. One of my students, Andrew Brandel, for example, whose work you might know or Bhrigu who came to Cavell through a roundabout route are examples of such movements. Andrew and Marco Motta published a book on concepts (Brandel & Motta, 2021). I think they bring a vision to that which I had some idea of and Sandra [Laugier] [also] had some ideas about. They worked on these ideas, but [they] also found new directions in which to develop which with Wittgenstein, we may call, aspect dawning. And for me that's really, truly, important. Half the time in the US academy [the issue is:] what is your legacy? What's the school you have founded? What is this concept that you have offered? But all I think I've done is to make some ideas available which I had limited abilities to take forward. I mean, you have to remember I was very poorly educated in terms of earlier schooling. I went to a reasonably good school, but I remember when my eldest son was doing neurosciences, [and] as an undergraduate he took a class in philosophy, and I asked him, what are you reading? He said casually that they were reading Kierkegaard. And suddenly there was this moment of utter jealousy I experienced. I said to him "My God, do you know how much I had to struggle to discover somebody like that, and it just comes your way like that?" What is important is not a legacy or what goes on in your name. My biggest desire like a good Hindu is to be extinguished from life when I die. Because there are others who will be there to deal with the new problems that will arise. It's their lives that are important. And that gives me a taste for life, so to say. So that I think is the question of knowledge, which is where the sensibilities can be, really different. But I see a connection there with scholars in Brazil.

C.S. Very nice to hear that.

V.D. I think that there isn't that ambition when you're working in those environments where it doesn't matter that you're not the most cited author or whatever. What matters is: in this world, this idea made a difference, in a small way. So, I am truly grateful that you give me a chance to talk about these things [*laughing*]. And this is not an act of modesty. It's honestly just something which is true.

A.V. And it's such a relief to hear this. I think there is a connection between this and what you said about devotion in our last meeting. We would like you to talk a bit more about that, as you presented us with such a beautiful association, a connection between devotion and desire.

V.D. This connection comes from this idea in many Sanskrit texts whether on ritual or poetry where the issue [is]: can you be put in touch with your own desire? Do you have a way of not distorting your life by the falsity of what you define as your needs? I found it very interesting that Mauss, when he wrote on sacrifice (Mauss & Hubert, 2017), completely missed this dimension of sacrifice. He was using Sanskrit texts, for a theory of sacrifice, right? And yet he ends up thinking that there is a transaction between gods and humans, a bargain made for reaching a desired object. But it's not gods who grant you your desires. It's you. So, yes, there are desires for objects for which you could perform a sacrifice. But not because gods really grant you that desire. Although you will invoke gods in the ritual it's the totality of what is going on in that sacrificial arena, the mantras, the invocations, the offerings, the gestures, that will make that desire materialize.

To perform sacrifice, the exact injunction is *svarga kamah yajet*, let the one who desires heaven perform the sacrifice, and the verb for sacrifice, *yajet* is in the optative mood. Not perform it, but you may perform it, by the one who is desirous of heaven. And then they go on to say but heaven is not something that exists – it is brought into existence by this act of sacrifice. Because of the fact that the creation of something (*bhavana*) entails creating something new, the heaven you desire is not yet in existence. So then the opponents of this notion of sacrifice put forward an objection: "if something doesn't already exist, how can you desire it?." The answer roughly is "You are bringing heaven into being by your act of desiring it." And so it's again very interesting how I think this kind of thinking joins an important move in ritual theory made by, for instance, Michael Puett and his colleagues who characterize ritual action as undertaken in the subjunctive mood. It's an "as if" reality that is created through ritual. I love that formulation, [but] I also think it's still timid. And the reason why I think of it as timid is that it falls back into the idea that an as-if

enactment is pedagogic in the consequences it has for the participants. It's a fantastic move to argue that ritual is teaching you to play with possibility. It brings possibility and modality centrally into ritual theory, but may be pedagogy is not the best description of what is going on. But I need to think more on this issue

But all this pertains not just to the bounded areas of ritual: it's really how we live with our desires. Do we take desire as something through which we actually brought something, maybe beautiful, maybe dangerous, into being? It is why I think the question is never that of a guarantee that you become a moral person because you're performing the right rituals. But if there are no guarantees that ritual will produce the good then the opponents of ritual theory say "You're giving everybody the techniques for doing things which they can use to cause harm." And the response of the ritual theorists is "We're not the ones responsible for your desires. We're only telling you what you could do if you wanted it." You're the one who wanted it. It's a very different vision of what is moral responsibility, what is spirituality, not, as many think, that I pay no attention to religion or spirituality. The who fault me for not paying attention to religion have a very fixed idea of religion. And it kind of goes back to that modern demand for spirituality and transcendence that wants to settle the question what is the good. The satisfaction of this demand for goodness comes too easily whether in popular culture or in anthropological writing, at least from my point of view.

To give you an example of these difficulties in sustaining their ideas in how life is to be lived, the proponents of ritual hermeneutics – i.e., the *mimamsa* school – had to live with the difficulty that their reasoning leads them to say that gods are just the creation of words uttered in the ritual, but they cannot say anything about their existence outside this ritual space. It's such a difficult idea to live with. But there's also modesty at one level that I find very endearing. For example, one of the mimamsa theoreticians who is totally committed to the hierarchy according to which Sanskrit is a sacred language and above other languages, is asked "But there are all kinds of words in the world which, are not in Sanskrit, which, low castes use and which 'despised' foreigners use?" And he replies "Well, yes, there are these words." "Are you saying these words are incorrect or inferior?" The *mimamsa* scholar replies "they're not incorrect for what these words are needed for." The opponents ask: "Would you bring a Brahminical apparatus to correct these words, make them a part of Sanskrit?" He replies again "No, because, the injunctions in Sanskrit are right for me to be able to perform sacrifices. The same Sanskrit words would not be good enough if my profession was to trap birds and domesticate them. This is what these tribal groups who use different languages are using them for." There's something quite interesting here on error, fallibility, and correction, which is very different from measuring against a standard that would apply everywhere.

I'm not saying this way of thinking is right or wrong. I'm saying it's a very different vision from the idea of fallibility as a fall from morality, or the big moralism apparatus that might come with it. What was it to be devoted to the idea that an action has to be undertaken because it seems right but one does not know what the consequences of that action will be. Gandhi was a very good example of advocacy for that form of moral actions. He takes from the [Bhagavad] Gita this notion that you have only rights over your actions and never over the fruits of the actions. One has to learn to live in this detached way in relation to one's own actions. There is a puzzle here. How are you supposed to have this detached relationship to desire, which is also a certain way of being devoted to the world?

L.F. Thank you, Veena. A very strong emotion among us, caused by our conversation last week, was joy. We would like to ask you about that. Uncertainty, unpredictability, improvisation: they are all qualities of the everyday that have great prominence in your work, and they are also qualities of ethnography itself. How can we think from this perspective about the place of joy in ethnography, particularly when we think about ethnographies around themes such as violence, social suffering, poverty – themes that are mostly approached through the key of "survival"?

V.D. I think last time Cynthia said this very beautifully, that there are no boundaries here between this is joy and this is sorrow. I mean, we know that, let's say, something like the emotion of being in love, or just loving somebody, it doesn't have to be the dramatic being in love, it can be just loving somebody. This love – it's joy, it's grief, it's waiting, it's anger, it's jealousy, it's moments of ecstasy, and no one emotion can be expunged from the feel of love. Some time ago I gave the Allen Dundes Lecture at Berkeley ["Time, subjectivity and the Poetic Voice", 2012], where [for] the first time I talked about how I recognize this volatility of emotions in aesthetic theory. This question comes up, in the Mahābhārata: some of the most erotic moments in the text and ones full of pathos are the moments of women lamenting the deaths of their husbands. The war is over. They are in the battlefield with bodies of the dead strewn around. And as they look at the dead they lament in words like "this the hand that fondled my breasts…". There are critics who accuse the proponents of the theories of poetic emotion (*rasa*) to ask: "How can you let this moment of death be so seeped with this erotic desire? Even if it is in the form of lamentation." And I think that's what the swirl of emotions in the poetic voice means for them – this is why working through these emotions is a lifetime of work. It's the way passion is built over time, even if its revelation is condensed in one moment. Being able to say "I love you" is a great moment – but what is the before and the after of this moment? This is what Wittgenstein talked about as the hurly

burly of the organism – these different contradictory emotions are totally tied into each other. And this again has been my difference with some anthropologists who want to draw boundaries around joy and sorrow.

I think it's interesting that it is more often the male anthropologists who get most anxious about my work. I find this quite fascinating. You know, there's always somebody or other in an audience who will say: "If you do away with objective standards, how will we know how to judge?" I say: "You will know when you actually need to make a judgement." I remember saying to Joel Robbins (2013), who is one of my kindest critics on this issue and asks: "Why haven't you talked about joy? Isn't there also joy? Or isn't there also goodness?" The assumption is, one has to find where is joy, one has to find where is goodness. And my response is something like: "But Joel, I'm not an accountant. I don't have ledgers or columns where I say this is sorrow, this is joy, now I've balanced the two." It's precisely the fact that how and where joy will be found is not predictable. In *Life and words,* I give an instance when victims of the riots are trying to re-enact that very carnival-like scenes of killing. And they are laughing. And it's clearly not joy, even if it's laughter. And yet it's not cynical laughter, it's just drawn out of them, unbidden, in a way. These events raise such questions for me of how these swirls of emotions move from joy to sorrow. And how to find expression for these experiences, without having to fix these in one position or another: "Now I am committed to finding joy, now I am committed to depicting suffering."

And survival is a very interesting question here. Richard Rechtman (2020) has an amazing book, *La vie ordinaire des g*énocidaires, which is about his work as a psychiatrist with the survivors (victims and perpetrators) of genocide. One of the points he makes is that when we think about genocide through the lives of petty executioners, not the big leaders, they don't have the time or the inclination to sort people into who was a friend, who, an enemy? Every day they have to fill targets. They have to select enough people who can be killed efficiently. They have to actually do the killing. They have to get used to the smells. They have to remove the bodies. They have to deal with the sheer exhaustion of killing, removing bodies, cleaning. And it's an absolutely remarkable book. Consider its relation with my colleague Clara Han's book (2021), *Seeing like a child*, which is written in a very slow pace with slow movements, with very rich ethnographic moments. Rechtman (2020) does not have great ethnographic moments. It took me a while to realize that the greatness of the book is to say this feeling of what it was to be so steeped in death can't be conveyed. Whereas in Han's book the description of the slow unfolding of events of a brutal war in the interstices of family life, allows the poisons to be drained out.

Sometimes there is so much good work that gets smothered by the demands of standardization. For many scientific papers this control over genre might work, but for anthropology, I feel it takes away the individuality of the

writing. In many anthropology journals, a paper will begin with an ethnographic moment to spark the interest of the reader, then go on to the theoretical problem and the context, and so on. This control over the form of writing assumes that one's style of writing has nothing to do with one's thoughts but the delight of reading Wittgenstein or Cavell for me lies in the idiosyncrasy of their style, including the punctuation, the feeling of an ascending emotion in Cavell with his long sentences, or with the sense that Wittgenstein's writing is prone to take you astray before it brings you back. One editor of a prominent journal made one of my students make one hundred and twenty-five small changes in the words he used, or dictated where he put commas. Sometimes I think there's some machine somewhere which will take a paper, place it into the standard mould, churn it out, and only then it will be publishable. It's a matter of tremendous sorrow for me that individual style, such as the geometry of the writing, or the way ornaments are used, is ironed out in this process of standardization. I'm very grateful to Fordham [University Press] and to Bhrigu [Bhrigupati Singh] and Clara [Han] who allowed my book [*Textures of the ordinary*] to be what it is, without too much worry about audiences who may not understand one part or another. The first reviews of the book that were published are in journals as far apart as *Wittgenstein-Studien* and *Sociological Bulletin*. Clearly, I can't have known in advance who will be moved by my writing. And then you people in Brazil have read my work so closely: how could I have ever known that this could happen?

C.S. And on the other side of the world!

C.P. One thing for me that is really interesting, a pleasure as I started to work more closely to you is to see your generosity with other researchers: not only the anthropologists. When I look at your work, all the time you are working with a big team, and you have this capacity. In Brazil people don't know so much about how you work collectively, so I would like to hear more about it and what anthropology can do with other groups, other researchers and other areas also.

V.D. Basically, I would say these collaborations get formed because there is a problem that requires collaboration with scholars who have expertise of different kinds. And that's why the range of people with whom I work is so varied.

First, there are the small number of field researchers from ISERDD, a research and advocacy organization in Delhi of which I am a co-founder. The people working for ISERDD have evolved together to become major collaborators in the projects we have developed relating to health and disease, quality of care, education, citizenship, in the slums. But almost all of them come from low-income areas and are first generation of college educated people in their families. Only one of them speaks English though others have acquired rudi-

mentary skills in reading and writing in English. But what is remarkable about them is that they are very independent thinkers and love working with ISERDD because there is no boss managing the implementation of day to day work. That's been one kind of collaboration which has now been going on since 1999. And I still remember, how it was when I first tried to teach them how to do an ethnographic interview. One of the young men was more or less barking orders, asking "How many times in the week do you go out to work – yes?" And I said "Purshottam, please can you record your interaction? Go home and then play the recording to your mother and ask her what does she think about this." This was all in Hindi. His mother [said something] like "You sound like some petty official who's asking for a bribe!" Today they all say how much they [had to learn about] even these small things like what's the texture of your voice, what's the way you would think about that problem in your interview technique. That's one collaboration which has lasted forever and which I'm grateful, moved, and delighted by.

The second kind of collaboration is obviously with one's students, where I haven't ever – or very seldom – written anything jointly with them unless they have finished their PhDs. And the reason is that people will often presume that I must be the main author. And whatever order [of the authors] you put on the paper, that is the assumption that is brought to bear on it. I usually will not publish anything jointly as long as they are students but at the level of ongoing collaboration of thinking with them and getting them to comment on my work and my helping to take their ideas forward in a way that they can take responsibility for their own voice, is very important to me

The third kind [of collaboration] came about because of some fortuitous circumstances. I collaborated a lot with Arthur Kleinman on this trilogy (Kleinman, Das & Lock, 1998; Das et al., 2000; Das et al., 2001), and I learnt a lot from Arthur and Margaret [Lock] on evolving a broader perspective on medical anthropology. But while we all loved this opportunity to collaborate, we knew we had differences, which were very productive to think with. Arthur had this anxiety about me that I am very hesitant to intervene quickly, and he would ask: "What are we doing for people to alleviate their suffering?" And my stance was that we have to refrain from intervening if we are looking for affirmation that this intervention makes us feel better about ourselves. We need to think what impact will this intervention have in the slightly longer term and how will it be sustained when we are gone. For example, one of the enduring points of difference in this discussion was this entire question of how to reach mental health to the poor. Arthur is very committed to questions of mental health, as am I, but for me that's not the only issue people are dealing with in their complicated lives. Arthur felt that nurses or staff at the PHCs which – are the Primary Health Centres – "could be trained to identify common mental disorders and to treat people." But I disagreed because my own work we were finding a rampant mis-

use of antibiotics both in public and private sectors. I felt that PHCs could become conduits for movement of pharmaceuticals of all kinds. So, I was hesitant to recommend putting psychotropic drugs in the hands of PHC staff. I'm not saying that there is an easy resolution to these issues. I'm saying that we worked [together] up to the point we could, and then these differences became difficult to address. Of course, I have the utmost respect for Arthur and I think his writing on care (Kleinman, 2020) was very important for me because I also knew his wife extremely well and felt very empty after her death. So, you know, there are emotions and not simply ideas that become crucial to sustain collaboration.

I maintain close collaborations with my colleagues. I work a lot with Clara [Han], and Naveeda Khan in different ways. I can't work with all my colleagues equally well, nor am I expected to do that. There are not only problems of time management but also because there are genuinely different desires we have about what we want to do with the kind of expertise we have.

One of the longest collaborations I have been engaged in is on health systems at the level of low-income urban neighborhoods. This collaboration grew out of some family circumstances. My middle son [for example] was very committed to the questions of health and equity and that led to this long-term collaboration with economists, public health practitioners biomedical scientists, as well as some policymakers. My sense is that policy makers are important consumers of our research, but I don't trust that just telling them what we think is the right step forward will result in the right actions. So, my sense is we should make our knowledge available to a variety of actors and stake holders and we should see who picks up an idea and how it gets implemented. But there are very practical questions that we have to face. For example, our team has just published a paper on our use of simulated standardized patients, trying to show that they are mistakenly called fake patients (Das et al., 2021). We ask: what does simulation mean here? What does standardization mean here? We argue that a real patient is as much a construct as a simulated patient. This whole work with simulated patients has required, first, [that we] solve the practical problems: how do you actually train a very large number of SPs [simulated patients], who are drawn from low income areas in different cities? For me it was exhilarating to be training them and I say something about that in my book *Affliction* (Das, 2015). So I'll tell you where my failures lie. The men and women we trained learnt how to present themselves as standardized patients. One has to train them to not only give correct answers in a clinical encounter but to also recognize which investigations or exams to avoid. For example, a thermometer in a doctor's clinic is a very innocuous instrument for measuring your fever. But we had to drill into them: "You are not to put a thermometer in your mouth because we know thermometers are not disinfected." And they would say "But when I go to a doctor for any consultation from home, I let him put the thermometer in my mouth, it is routine, what's the big difference?" And

I would say "No, you're not to put it in the mouth because we cannot expose you to a risk." And they've learnt how to answer questions but also how to avoid certain investigations offered in the clinic. "You have to refuse injections, if offered." So they have to learn how to make an excuse for refusing to allow the doctor to proceed with certain procedures. But then, overuse of injections is so routine in these low-income areas that the doctor begins to wonder why is this patient refusing to take an injection. In order to allay suspicions that the patient is not a real patient and thus risk of discovery, we have to create these idiosyncratic stories, appropriate to each milieu.

All these aspects of the training of simulated patients (SPs) went very well. My one aspiration was to try to get our SPs to see that there could be variations in the degree of confidence with which you express an opinion (as opposed to reporting a fact). This was very hard to communicate. For instance, they were asked to provide an assessment of how well they thought the doctor understood the disease, or, did they think they were prescribed the correct treatment? They could express an opinion but could not say what was the level of confidence they had in their own judgement. I devised many games and exercises to convey different levels of confidence in the way one estimates future actions, or makes a guess but could not get this idea across. What does this tell us about patient preferences?

As we have amassed huge amount of data on quality of care and on delay in diagnosis through using simulated patients, it has become very clear in our present work that at some stage in the doctor/patient relationship, care falls into the hands of the patient. For instance, if we ask that since the doctor knows that this patient should be getting a TB chest X-ray, why does he not prescribe it? Because, one, he may think "If the first day I tell them 'You need to get a chest X-ray' they are going to think 'Is this doctor giving me a prescription for an expensive test because he gets a cut from the lab?'" And so the doctor will wait to gauge what the patient is willing to pay. Even with doctors who diagnose the need for a chest X-ray there are ten other tests they prescribe which have nothing to do with TB. Why? Partly because they are following a business model. They are making money out of this whole transaction. [And] partly because they are testing how much will the market bear, and so whether this patient is willing to pay more or less. They are watching how the patient communicates that information. And again, this is very hard to capture within a simulated patient kind of model, but it's equally hard to capture for a real patient. Methodologically, one might conduct exit interviews, which is what a lot of researchers do. But it is not easy to determine how to assess the information, because you don't know in the case of real patients what disease the patient suffers from and if the tests were required or not.

I hope you can see that some questions arise from the trajectory of the disease as a biological entity and training of SPs consisted of their mastering

the right answers to questions about symptoms or about the kind of treatment received. But another aspect of training was about creating a socially nuanced story about who the patient was that would not arouse any suspicion in the mind of the doctor as to the simulated character of the patient. Training for this aspect meant sitting down with the people we were recruiting as simulated patients, and brainstorming on how to create a socially acceptable story around the persona we were creating. So we would start with "What is the name of this person we are creating?" And they would suggest a name. But if the name was taken from say a TV show that suggested an upper class family, we would say "That name sounds very upper class – will it work for the kind of social background we are imagining for this patient?." They would play around with other possibilities. It did not mean SPs had to have recognizably "traditional" names. In creating these characters, the SPS learned the importance of detail – that even something as minor as what is an appropriate name, [or] how should this woman be dressed, had to be carefully calibrated. To fill out the character of this persona that was created we would create imaginary scenarios. "Okay, so this person who owns a small shop has finished the day's work and is sitting at home but the neighbour's TV is blaring out songs, while he is trying to get a nap, what will he do? And one SP might speculate that, he will go and knock at his neighbour's door and ask him to put the volume down. But another SP will say "No, no, remember we made him into a shopkeeper? A shopkeeper will never get into a confrontation with a neighbour!" All these exercises were very important not because they had an effect on how the natural progression of the disease was to be represented but because the SPs were also social personas. So that's one kind [of collaboration].

The last collaboration I will describe is with two colleagues on a project of translation. I've always thought that it would be very interesting if we did not start with Europe as the point of comparison, but let's say tried to capture events within Asia, if we took two different points in Asia and thought of them as having theoretical implications for global ways of thinking. So the problematic of translation takes us to the wider question of what is their picture of language? In turn such a wide question takes us to various kinds of texts: we have to read commentaries in different languages in which we have competence, explain technical terms to each other, ask what the intersection of our concepts are. For example, our colleague Michael Puett might translate a Chinese term as cosmogony: we may ask, does the Chinese term capture the various meanings that come with cosmogony? He might then say "it's 'pattern'." And then look at it again and say "No, it's 'image'." It is not one or the other term that is correct but shades of meaning within a word. Or I might say "Okay, so there are three types of words in Prakrit – *tatsam*, *tadbhav*, and *deshiya*. The second type, *tadbhav*, is taken to mean 'derived from Sanskrit' whereas the first, *tatsam*, refers to words that move from Sanskrit into Prakrit and remain there in un-

modified form. But to fully understand the second type (*tadbhav*), it's very important to see what grammatical procedure for modification is used. Is this word *from* Sanskrit? In which case there should be a separation and the ablative case should have been used. Or is it that Sanskrit is seen as the normal location for this word? Then the term ending will be the locational case ending." And Michael might say "why are you so obsessed with grammar?" Or Andrew [Brandel] might say "Well grammar seems to be doing something different over here. It's not just for speaking correctly." Then comparisons with Europe might come up. Andrew is curious about why certain texts from Sanskrit were chosen for translation. Why translate the Bhagvad Gita in Latin? What other texts were considered and overruled? What did kind of obstacles did they overcome? Does the comparison of Sanskrit and Prakrit with Chinese tell us more than the typology of inflectional and morphological languages? So, in many ways, each of these collaborations I have described is determined by the force of the particular questions we pose.

[And] that's my other problem. We are all familiar with these policy statements from university administrators exhorting us to developing interdisciplinary research. Fine, but this collaboration can't be done by fiat. And it can't resolve all the problems that arise when different disciplines bring very different visions to a problem. [There] are various partial resolution possible. For instance, when can one translate one's results for policymakers? The more conscientious bureaucrats will rightly ask "Do you really think we have enough evidence to support this policy intervention?" And what we can say is that "Well, we're making what evidence we have available to you along with areas of uncertainty, but we cannot say to you that this is definitive evidence." We really need to rethink the possibility [of collaboration] very seriously and be ready for corrections as problems arise. [*pause*] I'm sorry, my answer is longwinded, but, I just derive so much life out of this ability to collaborate in these ways that I appreciate this opportunity to speak about it.

C.S. Well, talking about collaboration. We are close to the end of the interview, but let's ask if you have something else to say, thinking about this encounter of Brazilian anthropologists with you, who is Indian. We can say there is a stance that, let's say, we have in common between Brazil and India. We make a dialogue with the traditional established anthropology and we are not subordinated to it. You talked about this with Mariza Peirano when you first met her many years ago, and we want to continue this dialogue with you. You said today and you have in your texts a critical perspective on the identity idea, on what's to be Indian. Is there anything else you want to tell us about this?

V.D. Well, for me there is nothing obvious about how to be an Indian. I'm Indian by birth but can I assume that I will remain Indian forever, regardless of

what happens to India as a moral project? I have to constantly learn to be that person who is Indian. It seems to me that there is no straightforward way of claiming one's identity, as a woman, or as an Indian. And yet I know in my guts that, for me, just having been educated at the Delhi School of Economics was the most important thing in my life, or in Indraprastha College, or in Lady Irwin School. These places were absolutely central to my life. I have to say that a lot of Indian academics get to exercise power in all kinds of ways because of the alliance between universities and government. Sometimes they are pressed to do the government's bidding and sometimes they want to please their superiors. But equally there are many academics who have never been intimidated by such exercise of power though recently the pressures on universities to confirm to the state projects have gone up enormously.

My feeling is that this is picture is true for Brazil too. Somehow, you're not intimidated by the fact that speaking out against injustice and acting against it, will have adverse consequences for the advancement of your careers. When I think about American universities, there is this whole discourse about protecting juniors who do not yet have tenure: "This is a junior faculty, you can't ask the junior faculty to take a risk, because they will come up for tenure and somebody might hold this against them." And I'm astounded that you who say this, don't think that it's saying something very deleterious about you and about the toxic environment of universities? It is that you or your colleagues as superiors, who are going to sit down and determine the ability of this person to do teaching and do research, will take an adverse view of the fact that they expressed their opinions freely? Is it going to count against them that they said something that did not agree with your view? And if as junior faculty for seven or eight years of life, they have avoided taking any particular position on issues, how are they ever going to get into a place where they will be able take a position and trust that people can live with different ways of thinking or have differences of opinion? Sometimes the atmosphere of fear that is created through this discourse on vulnerability is also startling to me. I had always taken for granted that if I would not get a job in a college, I would teach in a school, but I would teach in a school in a way that was meaningful for me, and I would continue to write or read or do whatever I could. But here in the USA the default position seems to be that younger people must be always cautious on what they express because otherwise their career will suffer. This atmosphere intimidates younger people. Their fears are not totally unwarranted but my issue here is so what kind of relationship to yourself are you then able to forge?

I also think that institutions are just not thinking enough on these matters. Using the Indian University system [as an example] what was good at one time was that you joined as an assistant professor, you slowly went up the rung, nobody went faster or slower, and one earned a good liveable wage. What one wanted from the system was schools in which your children could be educated,

you could get help from colleagues and friends, and you could do what work you wanted to do. The pressure of having to claim that everyone is a leader, is outstanding, was not there at least when I was a young professor. Yes, you need to assess the person for a particular job, determine where this person's strengths lie, but why not just have a more collaborative relationship among different universities and among institutions of learning more generally, rather than this very competitive relation determined by rank orders and winner take all mentality? Those I think are really very compelling questions for me. I am fortunate that I have friends to whom it just doesn't matter where they stand in a rank order. As long as we have a living wage, a place where we can talk to students, we can write what we want, and claim our lives... yes, there will be obstacles, you can't wish away the power of disciplines, or adversities that cannot be predicted. But I don't believe that you are just a victim of the system, with no recourse to finding ways to shape your life. So that's what I really admire in my friends, the ability to do what is important to you.

I'm learning new issues around censorship because of a project with Clara Han on the governance of COVID-19 across five countries. My own experience of how to deal with coercive power was honed during the National Emergency in India (1975-1977), when I was a young lecturer or maybe a Reader at that time. There was a prohibition on gatherings of more than five people so you could not gather, for instance, to hold any seminars. We dealt with this prohibition by holding our department seminars at home. One of my colleagues was arrested. He was not a very likeable person because unlike many other Marxist scholars he would simply put down everything which in his view was not Marxist enough. But we, faculty members at the Delhi School of Economics, made it a point to see that every time he appeared in court for a hearing, we would all be there. And I remember the Vice-Chancellor of the university sending us a message that was to the effect: "This behaviour is not good for you. It's not good for the university." During the Emergency even the right to life had been taken away through a court judgement. But we were adamant that he had to see that his colleagues were there for him. I have a feeling sometimes that in a lot of universities academics write in the abstract on power and freedom but their experience of power at national levels is a very limited experience. The discussion becomes very ideological – words become empty. It's like "As long as I've signalled the right words, I'm on the right side of history." And sometimes the stance one takes is also determined by the microphysics of power, which are important. But then you need to take a step toward analysing it and not stopping at expressing indignation. I think of Foucault and his formulations on psychiatric power as a mode of disciplinary power in which tokens of power were marshalled to cover up ignorance and the nomadic nature of disciplinary power. But, for every sort of reiteration of knowledge that feels dead, as I say in *Textures*, there are these gems of writing in anthropology, phi-

losophy, Sanskrit studies, which renew our taste for life. As I don't know all the circumstances, I can't always decipher what is before me, and I don't want to sit in judgment on all issues that confront me because I don't know enough about them, but I don't want to run away from them. So I am willing to be patient and to learn. That is where the question of desire becomes very important. What have you invested your desire in?

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NOTES

1 As Veena Das herself describes, ISERDD is "a small research organization that some of my colleagues from the University of Delhi founded to document and analyze the transformations taking place in the lives of the urban poor in that city." (Das, 2015, p. 4). Das has been working with ISERDD since 1999.

2 Two of the book launching webinars that we could attend were the following: the one taking place on January 22, 2021, hosted by the series "Thinking from Elsewhere," edited by Clara Han and Bhrigupati Singh at Fordham University Press; and the one held on September 28, 2021, hosted by Sapienza Università di Roma. The first launch had Clara Han and Bhrigupati Singh as moderators and, as debaters, Piergiorgio Donattelli (Sapienza Università di Roma), Edward Guett (CUNY), Dev Pathak (South Asian University), and Michael Puett (Harvard University), and was held via the Zoom Platform. The second, also via Zoom, featured a presentation by Piergiorgio Donatelli (Sapienza Università di Roma) and Sandra Laugier (Université Paris 1 Pantheon Sorbonne) and participation by Prathama Banerjee (Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi), Roberto Brigati (Universitá di Bologna), Fabio Dei (Universitá de Pisa), Anne M. Lovell (Centre de recherche médecine, sciences, santé, santé mentale, societé, Paris), Lotte Segal (University of Edinburgh) and Bhrigupati Singh (Ashoka University/Brown University).

3 The translation of the essay and the transcription of the interview was funded by FAPERJ (Program "Jovem Cientista do Nosso Estado"; Letícia Ferreira's research project "Family dramas in bureaucratic counters: the institutional management of missing children cases in Rio de Janeiro," process number E-26/203.244/2017).

4 Cf. Parreiras, Carolina. "Veena Das – apresentação biográfica e principais conceitos". Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8-u3wz9xPXE&t=1128s. Accessed on Oct. 30th 2021.

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ANTROPOLOGIA, DESEJO E TEXTURAS DA VIDA: UMA ENTREVISTA COM VEENA DAS

Palavras-chave
Etnografia; filosofia; infância; sânscrito; conhecimento.

Resumo

Apresentação da entrevista com Veena Das e do conjunto de textos relacionados à sua obra que compõem o presente volume de *Sociologia & Antropologia*. Na entrevista, Das trata da imbricação entre escrita e formas de vida; de sua infância e da presença de crianças em suas pesquisas; das implicações de assimetrias e de relacionamentos longos em pesquisas etnográficas; da relação entre filosofia e antropologia em sua trajetória; do sânscrito e de diálogos de alguns filósofos com o sânscrito. Tece considerações também acerca da articulação entre gênero e produção de conhecimento; da relação entre desejo, ritual e religião; da noção de "texturas", que dá título a seu livro recém-lançado; de alguns aspectos da recepção do livro; da orientação de pesquisadores; das formas colaborativas de pesquisa que realiza; das dinâmicas do sistema universitário norte-americano; e, ainda, do lugar da alegria e do desejo na produção de conhecimento antropológico.

ANTHROPOLOGY, DESIRE AND TEXTURES OF LIFE: AN INTERVIEW WITH VEENA DAS

Keywords
Ethnography; philosophy; childhood; Sanskrit; knowledge.

Abstract

Presentation of the interview with Veena Das and the set of texts related to her work published in the current volume of *Sociologia & Antropologia*. In the interview, Das talks about the imbrication between writing and forms of life; her childhood and the presence of children in her research; the implications of asymmetries and long-term relationships in ethnographic research; the relationship between philosophy and anthropology in her trajectory; Sanskrit and the dialogues of some philosophers with Sanskrit. She also comments on the articulation between gender and knowledge production; the relationship between desire, ritual and religion; the notion of "textures", which gives the title to her recently-released book; some aspects of the reception of the book; the activity of mentoring young researchers; collaborative forms of research; the dynamics of the North American university system; and the place of joy and desire in the production of anthropological knowledge.