The Embodiment of Learning and Teaching: The Enigma of Non-arrival

Nigel Rapport with Noa Vaisman

ABSTRACT: How people arrive at their convictions, and how they come to change them, remain immensely difficult questions. This article approaches convictions as manifestations of individuals’ embodiment, and as allegories of their lives. As well as a rehearsing of moments of his own embodied learning, the main author engages in an email exchange with the second author, pondering how he might answer her questions about an anthropological methodology which more nearly approaches others’ embodied experiences: the convictions represented by informants’ words and behaviours. The article ends inconclusively. An individual’s knowledge of body and self is part of that body and self, situated amid world-views and life-projects. Alongside the radical otherness of anthropologists’ informants is the relative otherness of anthropologists to themselves. Our disciplinary conclusions concerning convictions, own and other, must remain provisional and open.

KEYWORDS: learning and teaching; knowledge; embodiment; experience; self; writing; Nietzsche

Moments of Learning

I took up weight-training when I was fourteen years old. I was small and an injury to a knee had put me out of my beloved football for at least nine months. But a gym teacher was encouraging; after some weeks of working with me on upper-body exercises Mr B. showed me off to his colleague—the school’s more renowned gym teacher who had once been a professional boxer. I felt encouraged to be my gym teacher’s special project.

Weight-training became a vocation for some thirteen years. Only as a postdoctoral student, in Canada, did I switch my focus to jogging and swimming. I found the weight-training becoming too much like work; it was too much effort reasserting myself, once more, in a new gym environment and with new weights.

Weight-training had got me where I wanted to be, physically and psychologically. But I had also learnt that as soon as you stopped training for a while—through injury or vacation—you quickly lost muscle tone and strength. You could build yourself up, but you lost gains far faster than you achieved them; you had to work to maintain the body’s states, and even between the ages of fourteen and twenty-seven (never mind forty-seven) that becomes harder to manage.

When I returned to Manchester from my first anthropological fieldwork in the Yorkshire Dales, I told Dr C., my doctoral supervisor, that I knew what I wanted to write about: the inconstancy, the inconsistency and complexity of things; social life was not about neat or mechanical models, about overarching systems, whatever may be the conventional wisdom about structure and function, synthesis and consensus; social life was chaotic, farcical, multiple, contradictory; it was a muddling through, which turned on the paradoxical distinction between appearance and actuality. Seated behind his office desk, Dr C. said nothing to my credo, but his grin I took to be a
complicitous one: the signing up to a confederacy which helped me write up in a personal way.

As well as delivering far-reaching lectures on ‘The Unity of Man’, I heard Professor L. talk as President of the Cambridge Humanist Society. It was a small audience in a dark room, in a college, Gonville and Caius, which was not fashionable with anthropologists. I think what I most liked about Professor L. was my sense of his marginality; reading to myself about the Comanche and the Cheyenne in the college library, seeing myself as one, I could imagine an engagement with social anthropology that went beyond the fashionableness of Africa and New Guinea, and dealt with the lasting Enlightenment issues of personal identity and freedom.

Dr C. introduced me to the work of John Berger. Was there a better way of writing ethnographically about French alpine villagers than Pig Earth’s assemblage of reflexions, short stories, poems, photographs and theoretical discussions? My favourite Berger ethnography came to be A Fortunate Man: the study of a country doctor, John Sassall, in a remote, forested English village. ‘Landscapes can be deceptive’, Berger writes (1967: 11); ‘Sometimes a landscape can seem to be less a setting / for the life of its inhabitants than a curtain behind which / their struggles, achievements and accidents take place’. And he goes on: ‘There is a bend in the river which often reminds the doctor of his failure’ (1967: 21). For years I found that last remark tantalising. Waking early one morning in Copenhagen—near the Clifton Downs and outside School bounds, on a hot summer’s Sunday afternoon, feeling my confidence grow as I answered all the Geography or Physics questions correctly, and saw that she was impressed. I knew I would not now forget—at least till exams were over.

Fear of exams—the wish to do well—was a large part of the reason I did not enjoy school or my teenage years. I consoled myself with the thought that this time was an investment: I was saving up enjoyment until my life really began—now based upon foundations of greater achievement. But I have found it difficult to reach or know that feeling of arriving at my life and its deserts. This stems, in part, from a recognition of the transitoriness and relativity of achievement; not only do non-exercised muscles atrophy, but I remember little from school and university swotting; while those who did not ‘pawn’ their youth still ended up doing well—while some people may not even know what an ‘S’-level in Politics (grade 1) means. In part, too, my difficulty stems from never feeling satisfied or secure enough to ‘stop’ (achieving) and to ‘begin’ living.

How people arrive at their convictions, and how they come to change them, seem to me immensely difficult questions—Enlightenment questions—and still largely unanswered ones. I am not convinced that talk of social-structural causation, in the social sciences, is more than ‘half-baked’ and ‘wrong-headed’ (Wittgenstein 1978: 62e); such talk makes human bodies too much like ciphers, and individuals too much like cultural dupes. I am more attracted by the Existentialist leanings of Ralph Waldo Emerson (1981: 8):
Every man’s condition is a solution in hieroglyphic to those inquiries he would put. He acts it as life before he apprehends it as truth.

And again (1981: 95):

You think me the child of my circumstances: I make my circumstance. Let any thought or motive of mine be different from what they are, the difference will transform my condition and economy. I—this world which is called I—is the mould into which the world is poured like melted wax. The mould is invisible, but the world betrays the shape of the mould.

Friedrich Nietzsche (an early admirer of Emerson’s) would appear to agree. Our theories, our convictions, he writes, are allegories of our lives:

It has gradually become clear to me what every great philosophy has hitherto been: a confession on the part of its author and a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir. (...) [H]is morality bears decided and decisive testimony to who he is, that is, to the relative positioning of the innermost drives of his nature. [1979a: 6]

[M]ost of a philosopher’s conscious thinking is secretly directed and compelled into definite channels by his instincts. Behind all logic too and its apparent autonomy there stand evaluations, in plainer terms physiological demands for the preservation of a certain species of life. [1979a: 3]

More generally, misunderstanding the role embodiment plays in knowledge and its expression, in learning and teaching, has been a characteristic failing of Western science, according to Nietzsche. The need is now to eschew that ‘philosophical’ attitude of suspicion towards the senses—professionally denying the body—‘translate man back into nature’ and embrace ‘selfishness’ (1979a: 230). Taking account of ‘nutriment, place, climate, recreation’, Nietzsche hopes we might ‘learn anew’ (1979b: 66); a kind of science of the passions is called for, a new high culture appreciative of the body, demeanour, diet and physiology (1997: 47).

I like the iconoclasm, the stylishness, the marginality, the definiteness and the idiosyncrasy in Nietzsche’s writing, I like that it was his vocation. I am persuaded by his insights because I feel close to his voice. In the ‘remembered moments of learning’ with which I began this essay, I wanted to take Nietzsche’s teaching to heart, relating episodes in my intellectual development to moments of bodily being.

Nor need this line of approach be considered anthropologically alien. Edmund Leach (2001), after all, remarked upon the way that poetry and novelty, the capacity to look askance at what is and imagine anew, were ‘products of individual human brains’; our inventiveness betokened both our individual freedom and our delimitation ‘by the biochemical machinery of which we are made up’. More elaborately, trope theory à la James Fernandez (1971; 1977) may be regarded as an illumination of the way we project what are initially psychosomatic experiences of body and mind out into the world. The elemental vectors of human existence, Fernandez writes, are individual bodily projections ramifying out into world, via cultural symbologies in social milieux, as strategies of identity, distinction and progression: ‘experience is anchored in our body’ (1977: 478). The body becomes that site where individual cognitions, cultural codes, social practices and ecological processes meet. Here is anthropology realised as a kind of ‘human ecology’ of individual bodies in historical spaces (cf. Milton 1993: 4).

Teaching and Learning Embodiment

If our convictions are versions of our experience, and if our learning is embodied, then ratiocination will not necessarily be a route to overcoming difference and reaching understanding. There are, perhaps, founding intuitions, grounded in individual embodiments, which ramify into overall outlook and become too implicated to be vulnerable to rational deliberation. This is how M. Abrams argues in his examination of the history of philosophical debate (1995); only a ‘conversion experience’—
a metanoia, not necessarily religious—dislodges debaters from contrasting intuitions; such ‘dislodging’ then entails people conducting themselves physically or bodily by way of different orientations. Differently put, affording others moments of learning—‘conversions’ from founding intuitions—entails embodied engagements (Dr C.’s ‘complicitous’ grin; Professor L.’s ‘marginality’; my mother’s sun-warmed car).

On the same day that Mark Harris and David Mills invited me to the Cornell-St. Andrews University Knowledge Exchange conference to consider the relationship between learning and teaching, as parts of an individual’s life-project, I received an email from Noa Vaisman. Noa is a Ph.D. student in anthropology at Cornell University and we had recently met at a conference there. Here is part of what she wrote:

As I had mentioned in my question to you during the conference I have worked around the questions of body and knowledge for some time now; however, I have not been able to truly penetrate the experience of the body and its role in the formation of self transformations. I began thinking about this question while interviewing women who had ‘gone back’ to religion (returnees) and I tried to follow their process of transformation. The thing that struck me most in those interviews was the way in which they described the changes in their daily practices and in their relationship to their bodies (i.e. going to the mikve [Jewish ritual bath], changing into dresses and skirts, and having to wear a hat or shave their heads and wear a wig, as well as their willingness to be physically close to men). However, I also felt that I was not really getting to the bottom of things, as if self transformations and the process of learning were happening on a level that words could not describe. I gave up on that project because I felt frustrated with my inability to capture the body in words both during the interviews and later in the process of writing up. So I was wondering if you have any suggestions as to how to go about researching these questions (…)—how do you talk about the body? How do you ask about the changes that the body goes through vis-a-vis the space it occupies? What does it mean to be in the world through/in the body?

I remember not being particularly satisfied with the answer I gave to Noa’s previous question to me during the conference (my paper was entitled ‘The Knowledge of Any Body-in-its-Environment’), and when the session finished and she came up to me, I was engaged with other questioners and could not make eye contact with her before she walked away. But what do I say now? ‘To penetrate the experience of the body’ … ‘to capture the body in words’ … ‘to access the changes bodies go through’ … ‘to know what it means to be in the world through/in the body’.

Despite his call for a science of our ‘selfish’ embodiment, Nietzsche questioned the extent to which the introspective consciousness could accurately know itself, so complex and so layered was selfhood. But then that did not stop Nietzsche religiously monitoring his body and its daily performance—against diet, sex, music, walking and intellection—and believing that psychological self-observation achieved a presence of mind which could have scientific value. His response possessed a kind of irony, then; no knowledge is certain, but a kind of knowledge is necessary to live; affirm life, therefore, and go on trying to learn more.

As Nietzsche elaborated (1994: 29–33, and see Grimm 1977: 98–105), humankind can indeed approach ‘the true essence of the world and knowledge of it’, the indisputable truths at ‘the root of the world’ which will outlast all sceptical storms and on whose basis will be founded ‘eternal’ works. One such truth will concern ‘the dietetics of health’. But while in science the mind thinks rigorously—as against simply spinning out symbols and forms as in religion and myth—still the human mind is human body, and nothing other. And while the critical motivating spirit of science willingly and fearlessly offends conventional pieties and so re-arms us with language as creative tool (rather than our being possessed by it in a static Weltanschauung), still science recognises that human languages inexorably consist of metaphors, illusions and interpretations only—its own included. And
while there is the capability of science to illuminate the human world of ideas—our cultures of interpretation—and ‘for moments at least’, release us, ‘lift us (…) above the whole process’ (Nietzsche 1994: 24), being ‘human, all too human’, this release from culture and ideology is only for moments. ‘The steady and arduous progress of science (…) will ultimately celebrate its greatest triumph in an ontogeny of thought’ (Nietzsche 1994: 24), in short, but at present we are mired in that thought and its bodiliness.

Even if scientific truth is a hope more than an expectation, however, recognising embodiment as our originary state, our anchor and elemental vector, is an important beginning. We must affirm life, and set about overcoming ourselves: transform ourselves into übermenschliche versions of ourselves. Towards this end, we must be pragmatic; use the knowledge, the culture of interpretation, that is enabling, that allows us to progress a little further down the road of self-overcoming. ‘Does this kind of truth better help us control our condition, better equip us with sublime illusions with which to manage fate?’

Nietzsche’s books accompanied me on my first fieldwork in the Yorkshire Dales: a kind of talisman that I brandished (more than read) on days off the farm as memento of a preferred identity to which I would one day return. Besides Nietzsche’s voice I also liked his stance: his ethic of ‘nobility’ as against ‘slavery’. He neither wanted to follow nor to have followers. His teaching was: ‘Don’t follow me, but like me invent a metaphysics of self and world for yourself that is self-empowering and self-overcoming. Make your own self and its life into your work of art’.

So now, what do I tell Noa about knowing others and ourselves, about researching the truths of embodiment? In the century since Nietzsche’s death, neuroscience and our understanding of consciousness have made substantial gains, allowing great claims to be staked; such as Francis Crick’s (1994): humans are no more than the sum of their molecules; conscious awareness, sentience, feeling and intellectualisation derive from the assembly of nerve cells in the brain, their networks and oscillation: neurons fire and consciousness results. But the details of such claims remain vague and elusive, leading some to insist that a purely biochemical explanation of consciousness is by no means inevitable (Eccles 1994), and that to treat ‘objectively observable phenomena’ alone and refuse a focus on the phenomenology of consciousness—because it is observer-relative—is to ignore the mind’s essential features, its inner subjective states or ‘qualia’ (Searle 1992). Some conclude from this that, our advances notwithstanding, accounting for the presence of consciousness in a world of physical objects and processes, understanding the self, free will, meaning and knowledge, actually transcends our natural powers (McGinn 1992). Amid the science of consciousness (between Crick, Eccles, Searle and McGinn), it seems there is still space, and need, for Nietzsche’s pragmatic approach to truth.

I think the first thing I tell Noa is that our anthropological enterprise has an Enlightenment heritage. The questions to which we are seeking answers link us to broad intellectual traditions that we need to be aware of and from which we can learn. ‘What it means to be in the world through/in the body’ is something that Western art and science has struggled with for generations and continues to explore. We are not alone in our disciplinary quest, and we should seek our answers in the context of a ‘human science’, broadly conceived. There is as yet no sure, scientific way to ‘penetrate the experience of the body’; to ‘access the changes bodies go through’; to ‘capture the body in words’. However, I like the way Virginia Woolf, for instance, attempts the last in The Waves; I appreciate the insights Nietzsche brings to the contrariety of the body’s changing states; and I am persuaded by the way Gerald Edelman (1992) expounds a theory of consciousness which emphasises the corporeal individuality of our experience and our activity-in-the-world.
Beyond the verbal, I am drawn to Stanley Spencer’s visual expressions of his bodily passions, and to Beethoven’s musical ones. Maybe you, Noa, can find artists of human science whose insights resonate with you, and take your anthropological project of understanding forward.

What might be specifically anthropological in this human science of embodiment? I understand anthropology to be the examination of individual lives in social spaces: the way individuals construct world-views and identities for themselves and the way in which these individual constructions wittingly and unwittingly, directly and tangentially, affect the constructions of others. Anthropology privileges those moments when individual lives and projects intersect and individuals meet a kind of otherness that is yet commensurate with themselves. The anthropological exploration of embodiment attempts to elaborate upon the corporeal nature of that meeting: the mutual influencing of individual world-views and identities as these are lived and expressed in bodies.

So, how Noa’s informants talk about their bodies is important, as is how this affects others, including herself. And how this talk of the body relates to other, non-verbal expressive modes. And how bodily expression alters: according to overt context, to informants’ moods (their implicit conceptions, perhaps, of contexts of action), and over time. And maybe words are not the best medium to convey insights from this field. So, we might take advantage of this much-vaunted ‘experimental moment’ in social science (Marcus and Fischer 1986) and of our ‘blurry’, ‘imprecise’, ‘indisciplined discipline’ (Geertz 1995: 97–98), to be flexible with regard to genre, to body forth data in mixed media.

Non-arrival

I am no more wholly satisfied with this response to Noa, however, than I was after her questioning of me at Cornell; I do not see this essay arriving neatly at a conclusion.

There are two issues here (unresolved since the Enlightenment). First, as Anthony Cohen succinctly phrases it, ‘[s]elf-knowledge and social knowledge of persons are incongruent’ (1992a: 222); the public construction of the identity of another is likely to be fallacious in terms of that person’s experience of themselves. We can try to use what we know of our own personal complexities to bring us closer to others—to resist simplifying, categorising or stereotyping them—but, ultimately, we can never transcend the radical otherness of individuality. Informed through a sharing of social spaces with them over extended periods of time, we can exploit our own self-consciousness to make guesses about what others’ lives are like, but we do not reach any objective certainty (cf. Fernandez 1992). The important thing seems to be to continue to write anthropology in the hope of knowing—rather than the certainty of arriving—and with the affirmative intuition that there is that other-knowledge out there possibly to know. Anthropology cannot begin to apprehend social space without attempting to do justice to individual lives, bodies and voices, or claiming that the latter are somehow beyond its brief, for it is of intersecting individual lives that social spaces largely consist (Rapport 1997a; cf. Cohen 1992a: 229–30).

Second, however, individual knowledge of self—the anthropologist’s self-consciousness—is a phenomenon, a project, a process without an objective correlative either. It may be true, in Roy Wagner’s words (1991: 39), that: ‘nothing could possibly be more clear, distinct, concrete, certain, or real than the self’s perception of perception, its own sensing of sense. It is the very archetype, the inspiration, of everything we have ever imagined for the objective’. But yet, the individual’s knowledge of body and self is part of that body and self, and of their projects. Alongside the radical otherness of other individuals is the relative otherness of ourselves.

‘There is no stability in this world’, Virginia Woolf has her character, Bernard, a writer, say at one point in The Waves (1969: 100):
Who is to say what meaning there is in anything? (…) To speak of knowledge is futile. All is experiment and adventure. We are forever mixing ourselves with unknown quantities.

I suppose I answer Noa, finally, by emphasising the situational and provisional nature of the knowledge which an anthropology of embodiment seeks to access and convey: ‘This is what I feel I know regarding what I understand to be the world-views and identities of my informants, in regard to those moments when I construe our individual life-trajectories to have intersected in particular ways’.

The poet writes that ‘Things fall apart’, that ‘All things must pass’; I know that the order I build into my body, into my memory and into my interpretations, is held together for moments only (cf. Cohen 1992b). As an anthropologist I aspire to access and convey moments of being when I feel I best know the momentary embodiment of others.

★ ★ ★

When I email this answer back to Noa in Cornell, she responds (in part):

I very much like the enigma of non-arrival, it resonates with me on many levels; for one, it addresses my frustrations with my attempts at understanding the transformation of self among the returnee women I had interviewed, and their bodily experiences. It also leaves me with a feeling I have encountered many times before; it is a bodily feeling that manifests itself in a small grin and indicates to me that I have once again come across the problem of doing field research. By this I am referring to my need for clear, structured answers as to how to do and what to ask, and the understanding that it cannot be taught.

I also agree with your emphasis on the radical otherness of individuality and our inability to truly transcend it. However, I believe that your essay points towards a component that is not captured (or is not manifest enough) in your claim for situated knowledge—This is what I feel I know regarding what I understand to be the world-views and identities of my informants, in regard to those moments when I construe our individual life-trajectories to have intersected in particular ways’. In Hebrew the verb ‘to know’ has two meanings: to know (from knowledge, acquired comprehension and understanding), and to know physically, i.e. to have sexual intercourse. It seems that in Hebrew, lada’at, ‘knowledge’, ‘to know’, can take place in and through the body. However, this knowledge acquired through learning, both physically and intellectually, happens with and through the other, or more precisely through the other’s body. The radical otherness of individuality is hence transcended through a physical act that produces knowledge. I am not implying here that through the sexual act we can transcend the boundaries of selves but that learning (not only acquiring knowledge) happens with and through the other. This idea came to mind while I was reading your essay.

It seems to me that the play with the ‘inquisitive audience’ in the essay also opens a space for dialogue between others or individualities. In developing such a dialogue you chose to answer the questions [such as I posed] through self-reflection, or embodied reflexivity; while the latent assumption in the piece is that through the anecdotes we can learn about both knowledge and body. I find this form of learning and teaching convincing because it opens up a space for the reader’s own reflections, or for probing into self-consciousness.

Noa’s issues with fieldwork ultimately strike me as bigger than anthropology per se; or to evidence that way in which anthropology, its questions and its methodologies, are extensions, exaggerations of everyday life and interaction. Noa asks ‘how to do and what to ask’ in the field so as to ‘know’ her informants. Ultimately, I say, anthropology and anthropologists have no more insight into this than any other individuals engaging with others in social space. Fieldworkers imagine, empathise, touch, listen, look, ask, experiment, interpret and guess just as people do with strangers and acquaintances everyday. They make a kind of pragmatic, viable sense; if it ‘works’, an ongoing relationship can be ‘negotiated’, chanced.

Then, what about carnal knowledge: knowing ‘in and through the body’, ‘with and through the
other’? Through physical acts with others we accede to a different kind of knowing. Yes, I think that is possibly (though not necessarily) the case; we can know—ourselves, at least—in a different way, and become different, by acting with the bodies of others. In Mark Harris’s phrasing (2003: 1), knowledge is ‘an embodied activity process’, often deriving from ‘immersion in the world’ with others (and remaining tacit). That is why I feel my fieldworks as a farm labourer and as a porter were more intense than my others; putting my body into more new situations I got more of a sense of feeling beyond my (routine) self. Equally, moments of teaching and learning can be made memorable by way of bodily engagements. Yet I would not want it to be inferred that carnality was a privileged route to intersubjectivity; we might physically be ‘with’ others—in a football crowd, a disco, a religious ritual, in bed—but, as with intellect or introspection, we necessarily approach the (body of the) other through ourselves alone. Carnal knowledge is still individual.

Envoi: Open Space

I like a phrase Noa uses. Dialogue with others, physical or not, ‘opens a space’ for one’s own reflections, one’s own self-conscious probings. I am reminded of my own conclusion in a recent work (Rapport 2003), that the definition of ‘goodness’ in a moral society might pertain to individuals being afforded the space to fulfil personal life-projects: a kind of space where we do not visit extraneous desires upon others, and they might come into their own. Poetry works through this kind of space, too; the poet practises the generosity, the ‘goodness’, of writings which invite readers to fill in the spaces themselves: to create whole aesthetic visions, kinds of pleasing sense, for themselves. And teaching, it now strikes me—after Noa, and after Nietzsche—might aspire to that openness and generosity too. It is an engagement which offers an audience of listeners and learners a space in which to fulfil a sense-making useful to their own individual lives.

The engagement, moreover, can be complementary: a matter of mutual agency. In dialogue, teachers and learners may open space for themselves as well as others—so that the contrasting terms (‘teachers’ and ‘learners’) becoming elided; exchanging thoughts with Noa, Mark and David, I quiz myself regarding what I might know, and learn, about teaching and learning. Preparing a response to them, I rehearse a narrative of my own life-course—now framing Dr C.’s Delphic grin, Professor L.’s ‘marginality’, my mother’s sunny car beyond school bounds, as a kind of openness in my life.

Noa, for her part, develops our dialogue like this:

One of my most powerful experiences in coming to the States to do a Ph.D. happened during a theory class. It was late afternoon and we were all sitting in a room full of animal skulls and dusty human remains discussing Bourdieu or Foucault. I remember myself getting all excited and in the heat of conversation I made a move to almost stand up and began using my arms and hands to explain my point. It was then that I realised that my body was not synchronised with the rest of the group. It was as if we were dancing to a different rhythm and mine was pulsing and beating while theirs was quiet, reserved. Through this first conscious, reflexive experience of my body-being I became aware of how cultural differences manifest themselves through the body and specifically in conversation. This event took place a few weeks into my stay in the States when I was still adjusting to the language and the culturally informed forms of conversation. This event took place a few weeks into my stay in the States when I was still adjusting to the language and the culturally informed forms of conversation. However, in the years I have spent here I have become conscious of a process that I can only describe as the taming of my body, my movements, and my willingness to express ideas in embodied form. There is a different way of controlling your body (carrying it) in this cultural setting and it has been inscribed in physical forms on my body-being. Retelling this story (the first telling was to myself) I am still left to wonder what has been inscribed on my body but has been left unknown, unconscious.

✳✳✳
In describing anthropology as a kind of human ecology of bodies in social spaces, I imagine as subject-matter the tracing, the interpretation, of individuals’ movements through environments: their moving through the environment of their lives, their moving with an environment through the lives of others. This subject-matter may be larger than anthropology as a discipline (it includes the philosophical, the psychological, the neurophysiological and more) but anthropology offers a particular elucidatory frame. The frame comprises not so much something factual or substantive—‘people in Nuerland practice levirate marriage’—nor even a certain perspective on life—‘human beings are symboling creatures, immersed in societies and cultures’. Essentially, the frame of anthropology bespeaks capacities: here are diverse possibilities of human individual and collective being and becoming.

Anthropology does not point towards one destination, moreover; it might hope for people to be converted from such notions of singularity: from expectations of life as a single-possibility thing, from ‘final vocabularies’ (Rorty 1992: 88) or from absolutism. It advocates, perhaps, an appreciation of irony: that detaching oneself from existing conceptual universes and looking at them askance is a universal human capacity and a vital cognitive resort; that human beings need never cognitively be imprisoned by preordained and predetermining schemata of cultural classification and social structuration, and can everywhere enjoy the malleability and the mutability of social rules and realities, the contingency and ambiguity of cultural truths; that practising a certain self-displacement vis-à-vis the world as is for the purpose of imagining otherness—rendering even the most cherished of practices, beliefs and values open to question and parody, open to the creative exploration of alterity and what could be—is our essential human capacity, our ‘human nature’ (Stagl 2000).

Justin Stagl gives the name ‘world-openness’ to our human disposition of achieving insights about our possibilities vis-à-vis the ‘whole of the world’ (2000: 26). Openness is, to me, the key term for anthropology. Anthropology aspires to a holistic understanding of experience in social milieux, practising a methodological eclecticism in garnering, interpreting and analysing data; as anthropologists we open ourselves up to an open field of human phenomena. Representationally, anthropology closes off no genre or medium as illegitimate for evoking in an audience the experience which the anthropologist would present, at the same time closing off no reaction in an audience as necessarily inappropriate. Ethically, anthropology espouses an openness of social attachment: it champions those communities where belonging is a choice not a duty, an achievement not an ascription; anddeclaims against those where voluntarism is buried under a weight of traditional, revelational or institutional knowledge and practice. Pedagogically, anthropology aims for open exchange: space whereby teachers and learners alike can find truths useful for controlling their lives and making their own circumstance. (‘Openness’ is also enigmatic; something, to borrow Karl Popper’s [1980] conclusion on human ‘truth’ in general, easier to specify in its absence, to depict negatively and falsify, than to assign positively.)

Nigel Rapport holds the Canada Research Chair in Globalization, Citizenship and Justice at Concordia University of Montreal; he is Director of the Concordia Centre for Cosmopolitan Studies.

Noa Vaisman is a Ph.D. candidate in Anthropology at Cornell University. Her email address is nv32@cornell.edu.

Notes

1. The conference was entitled ‘A Cornell–St Andrews Knowledge Exchange’ and brought together members of the Centre for the Anthropological Study of Knowledge and Ethics (CASKE) at St Andrews—Tony Crook, Roy Dilley, Mark
Harris, Kai Kresse and me—with members of the Cornell Department of Anthropology who shared similar interests. It was hosted and convened by Annalise Riles and Hiro Miyazaki. I am very grateful to all the conference attendees for the spur that led to the formulation of this essay.

2. See Rapport r (2003: 215–39) for a version of this paper.

3. Sigmund Freud concluded that: ‘[Nietzsche] had a more penetrating knowledge of himself than any other man who ever lived or was likely to live’ (cited in Jones 1955: 385).

4. I prefer the ‘missionary’ position to the ‘mandarin’; that is, anthropology, its questions and its methodologies, pertain to ‘Everyperson’, not merely a small band of mature professionals (Mills 2003: 13).

5. Of the moments of learning with which I began the essay, the one I experience as most ‘dislodging’ of founding intuitions, and as an embodiment beyond words and thought, concerns being half-awake in bed in Copenhagen (my wife sleeping on, oblivious), and ‘knowing’ my body as (in) a bending river.

6. Openness was the concept that Karl Popper (1980) made so central to his formulation, from Enlightenment ideals, of a contemporary liberal appreciation of both science and society; also see Rapport (1997b; 2001; 2004).


References


