For an Anthropology of Liberation: How does one watch and how does one write across existential borderlands?

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In his "Existential Manifesto" anthropologist Albert Piette (2022:1-2) finds inspiration in the "absolute style" of Argentinian poet Alejandra Pizarnik, toward reflecting on the life and work of the anthropologist. "Autography" is for Piette (Ibid: 1) the form of expression which best comprehends what being an anthropologist entails from an existential perspective; that is, the kind of existence an anthropologist conducts and what approach she/he can best take toward accomplishing her/his mission. With his definition of autography as "a journal of existence," a "text by oneself on oneself, written as continuously as possible, without any link to a specific field site, in the form of a journal and fragments, to understand not social facts, but one human being," Piette (2022:1-3) defines a manner of pursuing anthropology grounded in "hyperlucidity and hypersensitivity." Like the poet, the Anthropologist brings "to the surface the thing that is said, avoiding dilution", in contrast to the effect often found in written narrative.

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"The Anthropologist," Piette (2022: 2) adds, learns that her/his work and life "is not reworked into a narrative story." Instead, "it is existence that offers itself as a field for study." Because the anthropologist is "a self-noter, and is also an observer," her/his work becomes an ongoing engagement with the world. These acts of notetaking and observation of the self in the world come with long-standing methodological and theoretical difficulties. In this sense, autography is "linked to an eternal methodological question: how does one watch and how does one write?" (Ibid: 7).

In this article I take Albert Piette's earlier intervention for the *Yearbook in Cosmopolitan Studies* as an invitation to explore the potential of engaging with forms of expression (alternative languages, concepts, and forms of writing) which anthropologists tend to keep for themselves (as private, self-referenced, ego-centered, devoid of purpose in the context of the anthropological analysis). In this proposal for a *liberating turn* I provide a possible path towards a clearing (after Jackson 1989); not an ultimate answer that should guide anthropologists or convince them to do things otherwise, but the sketch of a horizon where the anthropologist might have the liberty to express her/his attitudes and intuitions in the forms she/he feels most true to her/his sensibilities and matured experiences. Building on Piette's manifesto (2022) and the writings of eminent scholars who has dealt with "human existence" in a search for alternative forms of doing anthropology (of watching and writing), I will consider the anthropological value of engaging undilutedly with human existence, and I will do so through an exercise of exposure of intimate and at times apparently irrelevant forms of writing, like spontaneous poetry.

To be open to others' perspectives and 'lifeworlds' (Jackson 2013) is to be open to uncertainty and doubt (Corso 2022; Corso 2023a; Pelkmans 2013). It entails emotional, intellectual—and ultimately existential—struggles which may begin in the field site only to extend and transform afterwards. Anthropologists, I argue, shall be ready to pick up the grains of existence which everyday life may bring to the surface of our perceptions in any context, at any moment, and in multiple forms. The possibility to engage

with such work is an act of anthropological liberty. I will engage with anthropologists' attempts to enlarge the gaze of anthropology through the recognition of the fragility and variety of human existence and discuss how such perspective becomes sharper when we turn towards ethnographers who study borderlands and borderland situations.

In the process, I will ask whether poetic, fragmentary, and unconventional modes of expression can constitute the object of our studies, perhaps reframed as the reverberations of lived experience. It is as if what we do in the field never ends completely but only transforms in time and space, acquiring forms that we seldom recognize or pay attention to (Das 2021). Drawing the boundaries between what shall be regarded as anthropological and what is private, personal, and irrelevant to the debate is rather difficult for all anthropologists and ethnographers and it should be constantly negotiated and questioned from a critical stance (Corso 2022; Corso 2023a). The article attempts, then, to engage with these questions, and it offers one possible way of *liberating* anthropological expression. It builds on a long tradition of eminent scholars who have debated on the limitations of conventional anthropological discourse and sought novel forms of expression (Das 2021; Jackson 2013; Piette 2022). By doing so, it reflects on how such reflections and limitations have been experienced in my personal path as an anthropologist of borderlands, forced migration, and existence, to explore potential dialogues and experimentations in the future of anthropology and ethnography.

I will consider whether it is possible to think creatively and collectively about an anthropology which is open *to confessing* its need to engage with methods and experimental modes that cross boundaries—where poetry, creative writing, autobiography, fiction writing, painting and other expressive forms become possibilities rather than limits for the anthropologist in a search for what human existence may entail. Can openness towards the "other" be reflected in a shift of paradigm altering how we conceive what being an anthropologist entails? In that case we would need to think of these "other" languages as paths that one may or may not take; and this will depend on a variety of circumstances, including

the inclinations and sensibilities of the anthropologist. In other words, is it possible to think of what I will refer to as an "Anthropology of Liberation?"

Anthropology and Existence

Anthropology is primarily, and ultimately, about individual lives, and individuals live intersubjectively, "intentionally or in tension with others as well as with a world that comprises techniques, traditions, ideas, and nonhuman things" (Jackson 2013: 5). To capture such "modes of inter-existence" anthropologists have developed methods of observation, analysis, interpretation, and expression which help them to anchor themselves in lived experience – a "descent into the ordinary" which often forces the ethnographer to an "emotional, intellectual, social, and sensory displacement" (Ibid: 9-10). The experience can be "so destabilizing that one has to fight the impulse to run for cover, to retrieve the sense of groundedness one has lost" (Jackson 2013: 10). Becoming aware of such wealth of experience and transferring it to an audience (the reader) requires daily practice and a complete existential engagement for the anthropologist. According to Piette (2022: 11), the work of "the Anthropologist" demands "continuous note-taking that mixes spontaneous ideas, critical comments (sometimes brief, sometimes systematic), comparative programmes of investigation, quotes that indicate a network of authors." For Piette, this practice cannot be reduced to the study of a specific phenomenon in the identified field-site, but it should expand to concern the entirety of an anthropologist's life. Such an endeavor "takes a certain effort," a dedication and sensibility which leads us to think of anthropology as "the expression—through human language linked with methods and concepts – of the existence of human beings… a spiritual task" (Piette 2022: 13).

This is for Piette "the radical aim of an existential anthropology," (Ibid: 13) one which confronts itself with the mystery of human existence that is common to both poetry and science. In the search for (human) existence, the anthropologist asks questions such as:

1. what is essentially human?
2. What is unique or peculiar to the human?
3. How does one observe, interpret, and make statements that have a scientific relevance about the life, interactions, and inter-existence of human beings and their environments?

These questions raise the concern of scholars in "cosmopolitan anthropology," calling for the need to explore appropriate cosmopolitan methods. In their latest edited volume *Cosmopolitan Moment, Cosmopolitan Method*, Nigel Rapport responds to Huon Wardle's initial comments based on Bentham's principle "Each one shall count for one, no-one more than one" by arguing that "Cosmopolitan anthropology is that science of humanity" that "compasses an ontological project – defining the singularly human—and a methodological project—gaining access to the human and representing it" (Rapport and Wardle 2023:2-4). This path to a clearing requires time, experience, dedication, and a particular attention to the self—"honest attention to each individual and their world" (Rapport and Wardle 2023:3).

"Like the poet," Piette (2022: 12) writes, "the Anthropologist searches… looking at oneself, noting, being an autographer." A tendency towards the self of this kind (in reflection and analysis) is however "fraught with difficulties," Jackson (2013:10) warns us.

> One is seldom in a position to comprehend the meaning of one's work any more than one is able to sum up the meaning of one's life. One's current work is too close to examine with much critical clarity and one's early work is so distant that one is a stranger to it.

Nevertheless, when the anthropologist fully embraces the dictum *Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto* (I am a man, I consider nothing that is human alien to me), anthropology can be "a window of opportunity, a way of understanding oneself from the standpoint of another, or from elsewhere" (Ibid: 10).

In the process of understanding oneself, one is actively engaging in the struggle to find an understanding of the other – already she/he is engaged in the study of human existence.

While some anthropologists recognize and appreciate the importance of the struggle for expression that anthropologists experience to one extent or another (also as the result of a tradition which sees them as the "experts" and "interpreters" of obscure worlds), a debate remains open (Rapport and Wardle 2023) on what constitutes the most valuable and effective conceptual-methodological approach to what Piette (2022: 14) calls the "volumes of being"—the "strength, emotions, thoughts and gestures" of human beings. Among the most experienced and prominent scholars in the world who have taken seriously the challenge of tackling human existence and made such existence their primary object of study, it is possible to notice different approaches which all have something in common.

The irreducibility of existence

A number of experienced anthropologists who have dealt with human existence through the study of strong emotions, including violence, pain, loss, displacement, or death, expressed their conceptual and methodological limits. Some have sought companionship beyond anthropology.

Veena Das' famous ongoing project on recuperating the memory of violence in the context of Post-Partition India, for example, builds on the need to engage in a philosophical and honest conversation with the

fragments (silences, broken words, lost concepts) of violence (Das 2007). Her intuition is that an anthropological study of violence and loss requires a serious engagement with ordinary life—the apparently minor, irrelevant, and uneventful moments where violence is in disguise. In decades of work in this direction, Das (2007; 2020) found inspiration and companions in the work of philosophers like Wittgenstein and Cavell, whose engagement with the study of human existence is characterized by their attention to the *small things of life*. Not the magnificent but the ordinary. Not the exceptional but the apparently obvious where meaning must be rediscovered.

"As an anthropologist," Das writes, "I am attuned to concrete others, even daring to suggest that it is in following concrete relations, quotidian turns of events, the waxing and waning of intensities, that we learn to be in the world" (Das 2020: 10). And in the process of learning to be in the world through the work of being an anthropologist, Das agrees with Piette (2022) in framing anthropology as a "mode of being in a world," punctuated by "literary references that come into the text sometimes unbidden, as well as autobiographical moments, as lying on the same plane in their ability to bring thought into closer harmony with modes of living" (Das 2020: 11). Das' sensibility to the richness of ordinary life and her appreciation for what mostly appears as banal, unimportant, or obvious represents a conceptually significant shift in how we attend to reality; what matters and what shall be regarded as secondary and left to the margins. It is by questioning the significance of what we are accustomed to take for granted or keep for ourselves that our gaze will transform. During this path, Das (2020; 308) reminds us, it is possible that the anthropologist feels the need to break the conventional language of anthropology up to that moment. "Could it be," she asks in the last chapter of her book, "that a different register of anthropological creativity opens up when we can find ways of acknowledging that we would have to beg, borrow, and steal words for no ready-made standing languages are available?" And she adds, "I offer the thought that there are different routes by which an anthropologist awakens to the reality in which she is

sometimes thrown, or sometimes drifts into; what we call fieldwork is perhaps better described as a mode of being-with" (Ibid: 308).

This "mode of being-with" has fascinated and preoccupied anthropologist Michael D. Jackson (2005; 2008; 2013), leading him to develop a new form of anthropology that he has theorized as "existential anthropology." Reflecting on a long tradition of anthropologists obsessed by the "collective representations" and "the appearance of objectivity" which reduced "persons to functions and identities," Jackson (2013: 4) critiques the history of sociological and anthropological reductionism which "reflected a Western tradition of the scholar as hierophant or seer" and seriously questions the presumption that language and thought "could ever fully capture, cover, or contain the wealth of human experience, or hope to mirror the thing-in-itself." In the process of building an anthropology that is responsive to this kind of question, he finds allies not in anthropologists but in philosophers, from William James to Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty."

In Jackson's (2013: 5-8) project toward an existential anthropology, five themes prevail. First, "the relational character of human existence," second, "the ambiguity of the term 'subject'", third, that "our humanity is at once shared and singular," fourth, "the meaning of any human life cannot be reduced to the conceptual language with which we render it intelligible or manageable," fifth, "human existence involves a dynamic relationship between how we are constituted and how we constitute ourselves." The sum of these five themes is captured by the following statement (Jackson 2013: 20):

> In order to know what makes us human we have to reconcile a desire to do justice to the multiplicity of human viewpoints, representations, strategies, and experiences with a desire to grasp what all human beings may have in common

Such reconciliation is only possible if we learn to understand ethnography as "an experiment in working out ways in which we can relate to others"

through "interdisciplinarity" (Jackson 2013:24). As anthropologists, we must otherwise learn how to navigate across the uncertainty, unpredictability, and forms of pain that the anthropological path may include.

In his reflections on ethnographic method and the philosophical turn, Jackson (2013:10) writes, "That I was drawn to ethnography was because it licensed the kind of controlled experimentation on myself that might enlarge my understanding of what it means to be human." But "understanding others," Jackson continues, "involves physical upheaval, psychological turmoil, and moral confusion." Within darkness, light may be found through the courage and willingness to take the path and rigorously work towards a clearing by accepting the evanescence of experience and build a method to best capture it (Toren 2017).

While Jackson has found satisfaction in an approach that brings together an inductive method with a richly ethnographic description of the life instances of the individual subjects he worked with, moving elegantly from his beautiful prose and poetic writing to a rigorous theoretical analysis, Albert Piette (2022) breaks more explicitly from the anthropological and sociological tradition and argues that the work of the Anthropologist should be defined by autography. While Jackson, an eminent scholar and poet, grounds his existential anthropology in philosophy and psychology, Piette here turns to poetry. Storytelling and powerful writing ultimately define the vision and style of both anthropologists.

In the volume *What is Existential Anthropology* edited by Michael Jackson and Albert Piette (2015), the founders of Anglo-Saxon and Continental "existential anthropology" engage in a conversation where they debate about the different terms, theoretical views, and methodological approaches they have developed to construct and engage with what they have both come to name as "existential anthropology." Here I am not so much interested in entering the debate they have already sufficiently clarified in their book. I am more inclined to reflect on what they share,

namely a need to reframe anthropology and the work of an anthropologist in terms of a refusal "to reduce lived reality to culturally or socially constructed representations" and, likewise, a willingness

> to explore the variability mutability, and indeterminacy of that lived reality as it makes its appearance in time—in specific moments, in actual situations, and in the interstices between interpretations, constructions, and rationalizations, continually shifting from certainty to uncertainty, fixity to fluidity, closure to openness, passivity to activity, body to mind, integration to fragmentation, feeling to thought, belief to doubt (Jackson and Piette 2015:4).

In these sharp reflections we observe how the two scholars meet in their struggle to conceive the variety and irreducibility of human existence.

The anthropological projects of Veena Das, Michael Jackson, and Albert Piette manifest the need to escape conventional ways of seeing and writing; toward widening our horizon and allowing the richness of existence to be treated as an ongoing existential struggle.

The question of how to capture these grains of existence—how to watch and write—is yet to be solved, but we have a common ground from which to start. If the destiny of the Anthropologist is "that of looking at himself, of also looking at, describing and expressing reality" (Piette 2022: 17), there are moments of our life and work where we may find ourselves confronted with the variety of existence and the, at times, perverse logics by which it unfolds before our eyes. At what point does one find herself/himself facing the limits of anthropology and feels the need to question its forms 'in search of a clearing'?

Borderland struggles

That struggle and search is a fundamental, and inevitable dimension of understanding (especially the human being) is a reality that scholars who

have dealt with borders and borderland situations confronted most openly (Jackson 2013). Borderlands are useful territories for our investigation into the possibility of studying human existence through unconventional forms of expression. The dimension of the borderland is one of liminality, transcendence, and possibility; a limbo that helps us to learn about crucial aspects of doing fieldwork—that is, after all, a living of life with attention and care for others' lifeworlds.

Borderlands have been the holding thread of my research in the past years. My fieldwork site being Lampedusa, one of the southernmost frontiers in Europe, I have learnt about borderlands not just as territorial man-made divides, but also as sites of indiscriminate death and violence, marginality, and state neglect (Corso 2022b; Corso and Mookherjee Forthcoming). At the same time, borderlands are about vitality, reciprocity, mutuality, and resistance to sovereign power as well as the normalization of absurd situations (Corso 2019). Borderlands reflect that tension between life and death and its paradoxical coexistence in multiple forms and contexts that I aim to explore further.

Writing about life and death at the European borderlands has posed many kinds of challenges. One has had to choose what to focus on and inevitably what to omit, while finding a discreet balance between theoretical detachment from emotions and the richness of feelings which must be conveyed.

Anthropologist Gloria Anzaldua (1999) famously opens her celebrated work "Mestiza Consciousness" with fragments of poetry in native language of the Aztecs from the North, merging poetry with rigorous anthropological analysis to express the ambiguity, contradictions, and paradoxes which belonged to the very existence of migrants at the borderland between Mexico and the US. "The U.S-Mexican border *es una berida abierta* [an open wound] where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms its hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country – a border culture."

In expressing the power, scope, and limitations of her approach to the question of borders and borderlands, Anzaldua writes:

> I am an act of kneading, of uniting and joining that not only has produced both a creature of darkness and a creature of light, but also a creature that questions the definitions of light and dark and gives them new meanings (1999: 103).

This necessity to reframe, rethink, and re-write reality from a different standpoint, to overcome the reductionism and oversimplicity which we may notice in the way we use language and comply to meanings, almost without realizing it most of the times, grows stronger when anthropologists confront "absurd" situations, when they feel that reason and logic are insufficient for comprehending the lives of those they write about. As if the wealth of existence shall be dealt with through forms that do not yet exist but shall be formed through collective experimentation and struggle for change.

I have written about the struggle to engage human existence at the borderlands in recent publications (Corso 2022; 2023). The purpose of both texts was to reflect on the process through which ethnographers confront themselves with doubt, and self-doubt in the field-site and afterwards, to suggest that the exposure of uncertainty in the public form (through written texts that may read as inappropriate, broken, fragmented, partial, irrelevant, or simply personal notes which have nothing to do with the core of the argument) is an opportunity and a responsibility for the anthropologist.

"Where do we draw the boundaries between what should be included in the academic conversation, and what should be excluded?", I asked (2022: 2011). And then,

> I confess I doubt, and as I doubt, I am at times overwhelmed by what I witness and profoundly confused by what reality seems to suggest, that I am otherwise mirror of the world I witness and respond to, a fragmented one, where some pieces appear, others remain elusive, and others still I struggle to acknowledge, (Corso 2023a: 29).

As I moved my first steps in the anthropological search for a way of watching and writing that could do justice to the great violence experienced by people on the move at the Euro-African frontiers, and the compliance, indifference and everyday practices of resistance of locals and migration workers from which I learnt during my fieldwork in Lampedusa Island, I could not help but seeking other forms of expression. As if every time I tried to work out a way of doing justice to the variety of experiences I had encountered and felt myself, I realized that I met a dead end.

> It was 26 August 2016 when I wrote "Believe me, being a direct witness in flesh and bone is not simple." And then, "I realize that I want to see, understand, listen, and comprehend. I also understand that the result is often the opposite."

Thus, I wrote down my impressions, as a good anthropologist does, after one of the migrant landings at the Favaloro pier. Landings took place after the migrants were rescued or intercepted by the authorities or NGOs and transferred to the hotspot on the island of Lampedusa. People approached the island after long journeys. Some had lost their loved ones along the way. Others at sea, before being rescued. There were mothers, fathers, children. Some people had been wounded by criminals and authorities in Libya or Tunisia. There were women who had been raped multiple times, and unaccompanied minors. Each one of them embodied an overwhelming excess of experience. So many stories, so much suffering and hope that strangely seemed to walk hand in hand.

Again, I confessed to myself:

> I try to analyze, look, listen, but I only hear moments, images, and flashes. Mobile phones from Frontex and video cameras from the scientific police capture these scenes… I realize that most of the newcomers are women. They are exhausted and bewildered. A baby boy appears in the arms of a doctor from the Red Cross.

And then,

> I feel sick as I imagine what may have happened to them. I feel sicker when I look at the dozens of people at the pier who work to maintain, protect, and secure the borders of Europe, and alongside them, the lives of these people whose rights have been suspended… How can we carry on? (Fieldnotes 26 August 2016).

In the two texts I mentioned (Corso 2022; 2023), I partly referred to similar notes and reflections from the field, but I chose not to consider the other forms of expression I have been using during and after my fieldwork. I thought of them as inappropriate. I also believed that they reflected a personal need rather than a collective project. And I was mistaken.

In his publication for the *Yearbook in Cosmopolitan Studies*, Piette (2022: 14) writes of how "the life of the Anthropologist stems from… hesitation, sensitivity, lucidity, withdrawal, solitude." The anthropologist is also "someone who looks, observes himself, writes about himself, to express" the mystery of existence (Ibid: 14). He further adds that this approach requires the Anthropologist to risk "appearing to work with a methodological casualness, a subjectivism, lack of seriousness, and lack of "sciences", the latter presupposing the search for constants and universals." (Ibid: 14). "But" he continues" this cannot be the case, because the Anthropologist seeks to understand the "strength, emotions, thoughts and gestures" of existence "without letting them elude the Anthropologist" (Ibid: 14).

Piette (2022: 11) reveals that he makes notes on himself doing anthropology. This "continuous note-taking… mixes spontaneous ideas, critical comments (sometimes brief, sometimes systematic), comparative programmes of investigation, quotes that indicate a network of authors."

I find myself doing something similar. I have done so since before I started my fieldwork—taking notes on methodology, writing personal reflections, and fragments of poetry.

My work in the field and afterwards extends into multiple forms of creative writing. I have written one short theatre script; a collection of spontaneous fragments and short stories based on everyday life and reflections from fieldwork; and a series of notes, drawings, and paintings that are all inspired by my research and ordinary instances of everyday life. All this material is currently on the *waiting to know what do to with it List.*

In the meantime, I speak to colleagues and read the texts of my peers who express their feelings of unsatisfaction when they consider the limits of the academic writing and its impact in the world. Some choose to become active voices in the media and intervene in public talks and debates. Podcasts proliferate, along with graphic novels, research-based art exhibitions, and collaborations with musicians and artists more broadly.

Several individuals in the academic community search for alternative forms of expression; ways of making their voices heard by the largest possible audience. Their responsibility is to make solid and tangible contributions to society, and although research projects require such skills, researchers often feel that what they aspire to achieve does not quite meet that expectation.

I believe that this *aporia* is inevitable and that one solution to it may be to initiate a shift in perspective—from outward inward.

One of the reasons we often feel unable to meet expectations and become successful in what we do can be found in the form and structure of the aims and outcomes we began with. Again, anthropology may help us think through our constructions of meaning and give us the methods to think critically about alternatives.

It can be useful to start with a deeper analysis of what we feel is important, and to ask what we have learnt so far from the extraordinary opportunity we anthropologists have been given in life. The time dedicated to meeting new worlds, encountering people who live in contexts other than our ordinary one, in disciplining ourselves in the art of living in these multiple lifeworlds, opening ourselves to ideas we might consider inappropriate or judge as horrific, learning from these varieties of experience, *is a gift*.

What we then choose to do with this gift is ours though it depends on a variety of contingencies. Every one of us possesses different characteristics, inclinations, tendencies, and sees the world from a unique perspective. The secret is to take seriously what we sense is important for us and for others, which is not the banality of a constructed distinction between reason and emotions but rather the complexity of how the two are profoundly intertwined and impossible to distinguish as they exist in the continuum of an intersubjective dialogue – within the self and with the world (past, present, and future). It is important to work on our strengths and weaknesses and allow ourselves to explore and be inspired with passion and vision.

How do certain thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and emotions take form? Can we trace patterns or identify instances? And what directions does our thinking take? How does it develop, and which languages of expression come to hold significance?

If it is writing we are inclined to do, how do pace and rhythm change? What is it that feels most immediate, and is there a way of integrating that as a mode of expression into our analysis? Things may go well or end up

in a total failure. It is precisely via the process—which we as anthropologists have the privilege to engage with as part of our job—that a collective shift towards anthropological understanding may be made.

Resisting Resistance

I recently produced a text (about 40.000 words) in Italian and Sicilian that expands from direct reference to my years of fieldwork in Lampedusa and research at the Euro-African borderlands to reflections based on everyday life circumstances, social media inputs, conversations with friends, acquaintances, and strangers. It is a work of non-fiction with fictional elements, and it is inspired by past and present events, but only retrospectively may these events be identified. When I write, I just write with no purpose or intention other than letting the writing do its own job. An act of liberation, I would say.

The reader should consider the liberation and purposelessness of writing not merely as a narcissistic and self-oriented exercise which has no relevance to anthropology. I would instead argue that when words come spontaneously in forms we have not predicted or expected, then we are faced with a crucial task; that is, the task of finding ways of expressing them and give them life. The words and reflections I am considering may appear as short fragments of poetry, inspired by the landscape or the events that were taking place as I was writing them. However, I am inclined to think, they are pregnant of meaning. The existential struggle I faced during fieldwork and afterwards had not yet left me, but only demanded to be expressed rather differently. In forms that an anthropologist may disregard and marginalize, with the risk of betraying the very paradigm of anthropological thinking.

For purposes of clarity, and to give to the reader some sense of the style and content of the writing I am referring to, I will transcribe a few passages from the original text in Italian and translate them in English.

Tratto della penna. Scrivo e non penso.
Brividi di fresco.
Sarà la febbre?
Un gabbiano piccolo come formica in lontananza.
Plana e non c'è già più.
Scomparso tra il fumo della nebbia che ho in mente.
Proviamo a far chiarezza.

Pen stroke. I write and don't think.
Cold shivering
Fever?
A seagull small like an ant in the distance.
Planes and is already gone.
Disappeared amongst the fog of my mind.
Time for clarity.

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Linea di mare
alziam le vare
Voce assalente
Che non dice niente

Ali posate
Stanno in attesa
Di cosa non vista
Di quel che sarà

Sea line
Up the shrine,
Overcoming voice
that makes no noise

Resting wings
Waiting
for what can't be seen
for that which shall be

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Inspiro ed espiro
Aria di immenso

Occhio bramoso
Cerco e ricerco
Eppur qui rimango

Attendo e già sbaglio
Pretendo e m'inceppo

Bisogno d'aprirsi
Smentirsi
Scusarsi
Redimersi

Tronco tagliato

Breath in and breath out,
Air of immense
Longing eye
Search and search again
And here I remain

I wait and I am wrong
I pretend and I fall

Need to be open
To be denied,
To feel sorry,
To be redeemed.

Felled trunk

Through the engagement with everyday inputs and in conversation with research questions I solved hardly after many years of ongoing work, I found myself writing something that reminds me of Piette's (2022:1-3) "autography": a "journal of existence" which had no intention to transfer a message, to prove a point, or to consolidate one argument over another.

In the text I alternate fragments of poetry like the ones I transcribed above with short dialogues, descriptions of places, events, small objects, past memories, present situations and perceptions of the future.

Sometimes my voice becomes the voice of some other; characters who remind me of people I have encountered in the field, merging with yet others I met later or I have made up in my mind. Voices came from the past and transformed through daily events I was witnessing in the present. It was not the reflection or analysis of any specific theme or topic I was interested in. Not the story of one; but rather stories which spoke

about remote events that kept paying visit to me in forms I could not understand.

Perhaps it may be helpful for the reader to add some autobiographical context. I was at a time when I had no certainty about my life trajectory, from love relationships to geographical and economic stability, and the possibility of a future in academia. More than that, I was losing any sense of satisfaction and hope in what academia could do in a worrying global situation where I kept seeing hatred transforming into violence of all kinds—a ever growing short-sightedness in contemporary politics, economics, and society at large.

War continues between Ukraine and Russia and a genocidal revenge begins in Gaza; an escalation of arbitrary violence against the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories.

As more people in an already devasted world are forced into inhumane conditions, deprived of basic resources, displaced, killed, and forced to seek refuge in shelters and refugee camps when they can, many others keep moving northward towards the promising dreamland, Europe. And in their perilous illegalized journeys they are being tortured, raped, killed, or left to die abandoned (Corso and Mookherjee Forthcoming 2024).

By now I had been writing about this for years and published some work which took effort, time, dedication, and intellectual and emotional fatigue (as is the case for all of us in the field, each one from their own unique perspective and experiences). What I had written did not feel enough though. There was something else that called for attention. Other voices which spoke at a rhythm which conventional essay writing would not allow for.

Fieldwork has never ceased in me, I realized. With time, it has entered my own life in such a way that it resonates loudly, with unexpected reverberations.

I decided to listen to these sounds, rather than keeping them in the margin. An anthropological exercise in seeking what is essential. A challenge, to experiment with how to express myself. But it took time.

Eventually, I had to let it out because I felt the necessity to do so. That work had to be done. Yet, most of this has been carried out with great resistance.

Resistance comes from a very specific way of understanding the work of the anthropologist and what that should (and shall not) require. The limits and limitations of notetaking, obeying principles of ethical conduct, and not becoming distracted by what anthropology is not. And yet, I still wonder (and I am not alone) what is anthropology, and what is the role and mission of the anthropologist? Is it about restrictions and fear, or is it an experiment in the making, a work in progress which allows to give something new to the conversation each time—not because it is necessarily different from what others have described, but because it stems from a different individual, with different perceptions and a singular (yet shared) perspective in (and about) the world?

Of course, I am not alone in this first-hand encounter with the reverberations of violence (Han and Brandel 2019; Navaro et al. 2021). Towards the end of her book on "The Life of Concepts", Veena Das (2021) wonders about the relationship between anthropological writing and death in conversation with Renato Rosaldo's famous work "The Day of Shelly's Death: The Poetry and Ethnography of Grief." Building on her appreciation for Rosaldo's use of poetry as something which came to him years after the death of his wife, she writes that "the sense that every day will be returned but in a deformed way profoundly shapes how we think of the ordinary." The idea that experience may come to us deformed is an extraordinary intuition and one which allows us to think of anthropology as an act of freedom of expression through the attention for what seems to have no purpose or relevance. "Anthropology perhaps teaches us how to reinhabit a broken world more than it teaches anything else" Das (2021:319) writes. This, some anthropologists demonstrate, can be done

through the analysis of how biography informs ethnography and vice-versa, that can lead us to comprehend poetry as a form of healing and an expression of anthropology.

Our role is to explore meaning in the territories of the unknown and the uncertain, at the borderland between life and death, said and untold, known, and unknown. Anthropologists shall call for this liberty of exploration and give themselves the possibility to sharpen their sensibility and gaze to mature in their search for what being human is, has been, and may be.

For an Anthropology of Liberation

The world of academia is constantly in-the-making. As we participate in this process of "being," we must express ourselves and feel the liberty to experiment. Many colleagues and friends have described their feeling of dissatisfaction with how academia often seems to require creativity and novelty but only within its distinct limits and conventional forms (Günel et al. 2020). As a proper scholar, you must 'think out of the box'. Yet there is another larger box beyond which one is not allowed to go. At times, and especially when we confront contemporary urgent issues related to human suffering, inequality, violence, displacement and death, conventional creativity may become a limitation to what could instead be a disciplined intellectual gesture of transformation and self-expression.

Anthropologist Tim Ingold (2022) has written a powerful essay on knowledge and wisdom. Ingold starts his paper with a piece of poetry based on an incident from his childhood. The little poem, he explains, "seemed to encapsulate everything I wanted to say, about the wisdom that lies in taking the time to observe, about how the inherent uncertainty and anticipation with which we creep forward in life can nevertheless open to immense possibility, about the correspondence of generations in the meeting of young minds and old, about what it takes for eyes to light up in wonder and astonishment, and about what all this means for an education

that—beyond the stultification of the school classroom—truly opens our eyes to the world around us." (Ibid: 36).

Anthropology requires anthropologists to search for a sense of "wonder and astonishment" and to use the instruments available—the study and presence of their own being in the world to begin with—to move forward in this eye-opening journey. I find it crucial to join the conversation on the existence of "the Anthropologist" (Piette 2022: 3) and on what that lifestyle and attitude entails in terms of how we watch and write about human beings and their lives through the mediation of our unique viewpoint (our eyes, our minds, and bodies).

First, anthropology should demonstrate openness and vision both toward the themes and individuals we write about *and also in terms of those feelings, tendencies and imaginings we anthropologists take to be necessities of anthropological expression.* It is not so important to establish a singular approach to expression. Whether through what Piette calls autography, or what Rosaldo names anthropoetry, anthropology shall be inclusive and critically reflective towards all that appears as distant, strange, and inexplicable or irrelevant at first. This is what doing anthropology will teach us; an openness not only towards the discourse of self-other, but also towards ontological and epistemological questions.

Second, the world we live in is one that worryingly moves towards authoritarianism and the normalization of inhumanity suffered by some individuals in the world. Knowledge has never been more available to most people. And yet, violence, wars, hatred, division, and sentiments of fear and exclusion keep growing across the world (Corso 2023a). The role of the anthropologist may then be minimal or even insignificant. On the one hand we may need to tell ourselves to put things in perspective and remember that we are grains of sand in the universe. If this is true (and I believe it is in part), it is also important to notice that every one of us does play a role. Our role, as anthropologists, is to be as true as we can about what we learn from others and what our journey in life is teaching us.

Truth is not possible without freedom. We need to allow ourselves to explore the other possible ways of being an anthropologist and to reflect collectively on what each individual grain can bring to the landmass of anthropology and to the cosmos of humanity. I suggest calling it "an anthropology of liberation." And I invite the reader to imagine what that could look like as she/he chooses to take the first step towards a dialogical, comparative, and intersubjective experiment in-the-making.

To sum up, this essay is a proposal for liberating anthropologists from their fears; an encouragement for us to express ourselves fully in the search for what human existence may entail. The anthropology of liberation is one that emerges from the need of anyone to free herself/himself and to find their own way of doing so. The scope of an anthropology of liberation is to break free from conventional constraints which limit our vision and ability to express what we learn from the world we live in. Anthropologists feel the need to break free from convention as the result of destabilizing experiences. Some manifest the imperative of finding other vocabularies, hence a different stance from which to see and write about the world.

To some extent, an anthropology of liberation is a confrontation with borders. It emerges from the margins of our collective practices and guidelines as professionals—it speaks a seemingly unheard, unknown, and marginalized language. Furthermore, it engages with the *leftovers* of anthropological analysis (personal notes, reflections, creative expressions of one's feelings, sentiments, beliefs). An anthropology of liberation may come from the margins, but it speaks to humanity. It engages in the task of liberating ourselves from limitations. It encourages us to embrace our fragility and make it our strength.

An anthropology of liberation can be a comprehensive and liberating theoretical tool; an invitation to expand anthropological work giving us the freedom to engage with human existence in ways that may in each case produce something different. At times its results may leave us with

resonances; at others, with gaps, voids, spaces of misunderstanding, or disagreements. But not divisions: taking sides is not the solution toward practicing what we feel is the best way of doing what we do—of living as we live.

An anthropology of liberation might allow anthropologists to express themselves in freedom. It is an opportunity to make "inclusiveness" more than an empty slogan, rather a way of practising our daily work. There is an urgency in this that stems from the variety of human existence and its modes of expression as these become political. It is a vision for a world where uncertainty, doubt, fragility, and wonder are values open for discussion; to be learnt from, rather than kept separate from who we are, as if they were deformations of our humanity, illnesses to be healed.

As politicians and powerful movements across the world build walls, spread fear and create division, cheered by unsatisfied people in search of a hero who will make life good, those who have the liberty to be free shall reclaim it and push towards alternative possibilities that may or may not work out. Such attempts are both a duty and a responsibility.

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