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(1) edited by Jacob Copeman and Giovanni da Col; (2) contributions by Veena Das, John Jackson Jr., Graham Jones, Carlo Severi, Neil Thin, and Alexei Yurchak

ANTHROPOLOGICAL KEYWORDS

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Edited by Jacob Copeman
and Giovanni da Col

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Preface

Giovanni da Col

This booklet originates out of a panel co-organized by the American Ethnological Society (AES), Hau, and *L'Homme* at the 2016 Meeting of the American Anthropological Association in Minneapolis. The aim was to hold an annual event debating terms playing a pivotal and timely role in cross-cultural analysis. While rejecting the notion that one can describe a keyword as a cross-cultural heuristic, and despite agreeing that much of culture and society hap- pens in "what goes without saying," the debate wanted to highlight how the struggle in the use of language to encompass human experiences may give expression to realities that carry family resemblances. The organizers concurred that one of the crucial tasks of anthropology is to highlight the negation or inversion between familiar terms, a disjunctive homonymity that could be resolved by the formulation of novel worldviews or theoretical translations and advancements.

Fakes, forgery, counterfeits, hoaxes, frauds, knock-offs—such terms speak, ostensibly, to the inverse of truth or the obverse of authenticity and sincerity.

Do all cultures equally spend an incredible amount of energy and labor on detecting differences between the phony and the genuine? What does the modern human obsession with fabrications and frauds tell us about our- selves? And what can anthropology tell us about this obsession?

Fakery, forgery, fiction, as well as the verb "to feign" stem from Latin verbs referring to the productive, creative, and inventive activity of shaping and molding, *facere, fabricare,* and *fingere,* and cannot be clearly distinguished from poetic and poietic activity. A very strong commitment to authenticity appears in many contemporary manifestations of religious radicalism, yet a fundamental ambivalence towards reality inhabit several cosmologies and may be found in the Sanskrit concept of *māyā*, "illusion," "magic," "trick." Fakery and tricksters may serve to outwit others, but along with this negative and unfavorable connotation of deception or ruse the concepts may open up creative acts or achievements of something good. Everyday life dwells in a totalizing and unambiguous commitment to sincerity and authenticity, and Western philosophical and ethical conceits about deception tend to stand in contradistinction to regimes of "truth" and function *instrumentally*—i.e., through misdirection and/or falsification for either negative or positive ends, a trope that goes back as far as Plato's "noble lie." Yet ritual theory and anthropological studies of playing teach people to experience the world as deceptive, ambiguous, and uncertain and accept the productive role of the subjunctive, the fake, and other—"as if "—modes of relationships with the fabricated.

Although ideas of malpractice as incompetence or ignorance are found in many different ancient and modern contexts, the idea of fake as a simulation of an authentic/original behavior is more difficult to find

in ancient worlds and seems to be a modern semantic shift. Parrhesia, the Greek's practice of frank truth telling famously studied by Foucault, cannot be separated from fakery, forgery, enchantment through speech acts which have become forms of knowledge enacted by tragedy, comedy, or political oratory. Statecraft and kingship often operate through stratagems and tricks that the king should use in order to create the illusion of a totalizing power. Hoaxes and frauds inhabit academia, yet plagiarism highlights a delicate boundary between theft of knowledge and its imitation to generate novel views. Imposter religious figures, fake goods, fake identities, corrupted foods, counterfeit medications, copyrights and "copy left," can all be employed towards the service or revelation of truth. Where trust and truth have been deemed the glue of human relationships and the motor of cooperative interactions, this booklet showcases cultural contexts where deception and mistrust flourish and seem to produce effective, albeit opaque, forms of sociality.

CHAPTER 1

Fakes, damned fakes, and ethnography

John L. Jackson, Jr., *University of Pennsylvania*

I first read *In Search of Respect* as a graduate student, and it really moved me—in a few sections, almost to tears (Bourgois 1996). I appreciated its raw power, its unblinking commitment to a kind of hyperrealist yet nonromanticized rendition of drug culture in East Harlem. It was like no ethnography I'd encountered before. I was also pretty sure that this Philippe Bourgois person, whoever he was, had made the stuff up. Maybe not all of it, but enough. I figured that there was little chance he could have gotten these drug dealers and their families to disclose so much about themselves, no way they would allow him to witness these intimate—and sometimes illicit—aspects of their daily lives. I didn't believe it.

That was my initial stance on the Bourgois book's veracity, a position I held before starting my own ethnographic research in New York, first among Hebrew Israelites in Brooklyn and then with Manhattanites negotiating gentrification and other class-based tensions on the other side of Harlem from where Bourgois conducted his study. Once I began my first fieldwork stint, I found out pretty quickly that people are prone to sharing all kinds of private and personal information about themselves with would-be ethnographers, information that they have absolutely no business sharing—precious and potentially damaging stuff about existential dilemmas and familial dysfunctions, about their most self-destructive addictions and hate-saturated political perspectives. Anthropological methods exploit our seemingly species-based tendency to divulge inappropriate amounts of personal information to people who are adept at displaying a sincere interest in hearing it. (This is all the more reason to remind ourselves that Institutional Review Boards don't nearly get to the heart of the matter in terms of how complicated "the field" actually is as a moral landscape, which is why we have to continue reimagining and recalibrating the ethical coefficients that ground any ethnographic gambit.)

Of course, "truth is stranger than fiction," and ethnographers don't have to concoct fanciful and completely made-up stories out of thin air to get at the complex and cathected intricacies of people's cultural worlds. Even still, one thing we've learned is that in a methodologically and intellectually compelling sense, all ethnographers are liars. That's because all ethnography is fabrication and invention, fakery of the highest representational order. Not because researchers are trying to be dishonest and tell untruths, but as a function of the fact that every depiction is never

simply or simplistically a straightforward reflection of what one stumbles upon while traipsing around some hard and fast field-site. Any ethnography is an authorial construction, a collaborative one, no doubt, but no less contrived because of such on-the-ground partnerships between researcher and researched. That is a post-*Writing Culture* truism, and it insists that ethnography is worth doing precisely because it doesn't pretend itself into a land of scientistic objectivity as easily and effortlessly as other disciplines' methods do (Clifford and Marcus 1986; see also Starn 2015).

All forms of ostensible fakery are hardly fake in exactly the same ways. The ethnographic lens provides an angle on cultural universes that is fine-grained, specifically contextualized, and particularly good at rewarding careful interrogation of its implicit maneuvers. And this isn't about navel gazing as the coolest form of intellectual solipsism; it means examining material and discursive practices/processes in the manufacturing of anthropological claims and facts to help explain how we create the tales we believe about the world and our collective places in it.

I am fond of telling my students—too flippantly, perhaps—that ethnography is a powerful and effective way to manipulate other people. And it is not just such a potential manipulation once translated to the printed page. It also instantiates a kind of inevitable social dissimulation in the field. What difference does it make, say, to cultivate something that might look and feel like friendship under the auspices of social scientific research? And maybe more pointedly, how might ethnographic encounters create a potentially significant venue for changing other people's minds without explicitly declaring to do so?

One way to get people to rethink some of their most cherished perspectives is to listen to them carefully

and ask pointed follow-up questions about why they believe what they believe, especially when said beliefs seem crazy or offensive, mean-spirited or exclusionary. I once had an Italian-American tow-truck driver in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, make what seemed like a truly earnest effort to bond with me in the cab of his vehicle (while he was towing my car) by railing against those "Mexicans" destroying the South Philadelphia neighborhood where he grew up.[1] My response to his heartfelt but hostile diatribe was to ask a series of questions about his statements that prompted him to unpack these contentions more explicitly, his answers to my queries slowly demonstrating the contradictions and incoherencies of his position. (Why were his immigrant forbears any more deserving of support than current arrivals when the two immigrant sagas are so similar?) A genuinely proffered question that shows one has intently listened and truly wants to know more about what an interlocutor thinks can be far more piercing and impactful (in terms of getting people to ponder their own perspectives) than screaming about someone's racist xenophobia. ("What makes Mexicans so different?" "Do they face any of the same challenges that new arrivals from Italy had to deal with in the early twentieth century, foreigners like your grandparents?" "How important was Christianity to you and your family during your childhood?" "Mexican arrivals sometimes seem to demonstrate more explicitly religious commitments than native-born Americans, no? If so, does that feel familiar given the history of Italian investments in Catholicism in urban America?" And on and on I went, for the bulk of our relatively

1. I relay a version of this story in Daniels and Jackson (2014).

brief ride together.) I didn't change the tow-driver's mind on the spot that day, but I would be surprised if I hadn't helped to plant just a few more tiny seeds in the garden of his own self-doubt about such easy ethno-racial scapegoating. Or maybe I was just nurturing seeds sown by previous cultural interlocutors. Either way, my question marks were lies meant to change his view, and I was willing to accept a wide horizon for determining success.

All of this talk about the fictional underpinnings of ethnography is no consolation for sociologist Alice Goffman and the heat she faced with the publication of her first book, heat that came with much less light than some critics might proclaim (Goffman 2014). Goffman's work among black men "on the run" from the law is a piercing interrogation of what fugitivity feels like in contemporary, urban Black America. And several reviewers have publicly called it out as a "fake" of ethically damning proportions, nothing more than a self-aggrandizing lie told in explicitly ethnographic registers.[2] Of course, if you were to scrutinize just about any other ethnographic monograph the way hers was intricately unpacked and dissected, you'd likely see striking inconsistencies and implausibilities, which need not mean that those other ethnographic researchers (or Goffman) are explicitly attempting to misrepresent what they experienced in the field. Michael Taussig, for one, is good at vouching for the facticity of his observations while concomitantly (and even affectionately) labeling ethnography as "the really made up" (Taussig 2011). For Taussig, it isn't a zero-sum scenario wherein either we are being honest about what we witnessed during fieldwork or we are making it up. Our

2. For one such critique of Goffman, see Forman (2014).

job is to theorize the inescapable simultaneity of those two possibilities. That is akin to science-fiction writer Samuel R. Delaney admitting in his autobiography, *The Motion of Light in Water*, that he had spent years with a date for his own father's death that felt right and correct to him even though he was later able to verify that he had been living with a date that was off by a full year in terms of its chronological accuracy. His father had died. Delaney attended the funeral. None of that was fudged. And it was a significant loss for him. No question about it. Still, he improperly filed this gloomy event away into a temporal muck that was convincingly wrong though it seemed somehow true.

So, although I initially thought that Philippe Bourgois was a liar, the same way Goffman is being characterized in much of the popular press, I hadn't conducted my own research yet and didn't quite realize that perfectly reasonable and otherwise cautious people would be totally fine—after a few months of "deep hanging out"—with the idea of telling an ethnographer things they should probably have been cautioned against divulging, intimate details about their worlds, sometimes utterly unflattering facts or ugly allegations, which isn't to say that folks don't lie to researchers too, or that they don't ham in front of the proverbial ethnographic camera, playing things up for the sake of an anthropological gaze. People perform for the researcher's benefit all the time, which serves as yet another reason why ethnography takes nuance and subtlety to distill with any kind of explanatory confidence. (Think, here, of Clifford Geertz's classic twitches, winks, and faked/simulated winks discussion; Geertz 1973.[3])

3. For my own idiosyncratic critique of how we might reconceptualize/redeploy "thick description" in

I've long been partial to the likes of Jean Baudrillard, scholar of the simulacra, champion of the notion that in a nihilistic world "theoretical violence, not truth, is the only resource left to us" (1994: 163). Violently reworking his analytical logics, one might say that there is no ethnographic *real* at all. There couldn't be. It is fakery all the way down the ethnographic rabbit hole. Fake friendships. Fake data. Fake feelings. Fake science. For him, *In Search of Respect* may never have been written (Baudrillard 1995). That is, there is so much structural imbalance in the relationship between elite academic researchers and poor urban residents that ethnography as a scholarly pursuit may be doomed from the start, doomed to nonexistence when judged on any of the terms that would give it true epistemological purchase or ontological value.

And there are so many other ways in which "the fake" has defined and overdetermined anthropological question-asking, past and present. Racial categories are a form of fakery that anthropology helped dress up and make respectable in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a sin for which the discipline continues to do penance today, this promoting of what some have called fake biology, a fake biology that still viscerally controls the thinking and feeling of so many racialized subjects around the world (even if racial investments and taxonomies are situationally distinct). Leo Felton is a powerful textbook example of such deep-seated and visceral control. He is a "mixed race" love child of the 1960s who had to pretend to be a dark southern Italian so that he could conspire with skinhead allies in a plot to blow up Jewish monuments

contemporary anthropological discussions, see Jackson (2014).

in Massachusetts (Jackson 2008). Once arrested and exposed as a fake-Nazi, as not really "white," as someone passing for Italian-American, Felton confessed to reporters that he was fully aware of race's biological immateriality. However, his recognition of race's status as a biological lie, a scientific fiction, didn't dampen his commitments to white supremacy. Knowing race's fakery didn't inoculate him from its misplaced identificatory trickery. When it comes to negotiating such tricks, you can be in on the hoax and still get uncontrollably caught up in its canard.

As a researcher, I used to have an overly romantic notion of what "the fake" could accomplish, of what purposeful fakery could do. You can spy it in some of my early work. In *Real Black: Adventures in Racial Sincerity*, I intimate that knockoffs, counterfeit commodities, misappropriated goods and services, might just gum up aspects of our global capital system in service to those most precariously perched within it, those with the least access to spoils of capitalist success based on material accumulation (Jackson 2005). I wanted to imagine the ambiguities and ambivalences such counterfeits promote as potentially counterhegemonic responses to the most lopsided versions of capitalist possibility—even though I'd already read anthropological theorist Rosalind Morris make a powerful case (in a discussion of gender and sexuality) against such fetishized assumptions about foregone political conclusions flowing automatically from ambiguity's seductive promises (Morris 1995). Invoking the "fake" need not mean empowering the marginalized. Indeed, it could manufacture a sense of uncertainty in ways that reproduce conventional status hierarchies and intensify material inequities.

Just one example to highlight the point. It is problematic when concerns about so-called "fake news"

seek to make all news coverage suspect and nonauthoritative, when one is forced to come to the defense of journalism, the fourth estate, as powerful political operatives demonize and delegitimize it in the eyes of a larger body politic. In some ways, journalism is a lot like ethnography in its practitioners' ability/need to listen to important storytellers—and insofar as journalists should hardly boast too confidently about pristine access to objectivity, no matter how carefully they stick to time-tested formulas for how to organize leads and structure the unfurling of copy for "hard news" articles—a hardness of a piece, aspirationally, with the *harder* social sciences (the disciplines more respected and generally better compensated than their supposedly softer disciplinary cousins). But there is fake, and then there is fake. That is, it makes no sense to imagine that babies and bathwater are the same thing just because they are both constituted by atoms.

While a graduate student, a few years before I first read Bourgois and conducted my own ethnographic research, I had the surreal experience of being in hostile theory courses in the 1990s at Columbia University, which was, back then, a decidedly Saidian institution. Everyone was reading/assigning *Orientalism*, and many scholarly pronouncements on campus were explicitly backstopped by invocations of Michel Foucault. So, I shouldn't have been surprised that I found myself enrolled in graduate anthropology courses with students from the Department of English who were telling all of us anthropology students—in what felt like every single comment made during every one of our class sessions—that the discipline of Anthropology is so tainted and corrupt that it shouldn't exist. Period. Under any circumstance. It was intellectually irredeemable, epistemologically bankrupt. There is nothing good that can come from studying under the

auspices of this handmaiden of colonialism, they said. Ethnography is an imperialist intellectual project *par excellence*. Why would a poor black boy from Brooklyn be in bed with such a racist disciplinary formation? And I was made to defend a field that I (more than them, I thought) also recognized had had a problematic racialist/colonialist history. However, that history didn't mean that its approach to social analysis was completely invalid—or beyond reimagination.

As a matriculating PhD student, I had been fond of invoking (still do from time to time) the classic line from anthropologist John Gwaltney's exchange with a black factory worker, Othman Sullivan, who expressed deep skepticism about the discipline: "I think this anthropology is just another way of calling me a nigger" (Gwaltney 1993). Sullivan's suspicion resonated. So, it felt weird to have to defend the field to dismissive colleagues from English, especially since I agreed with some of their critiques. That situation feels similar to my rabid desire these days to defend journalism from current hashtagged attacks calling its most standard of industry practices "fake news," politics baked into reportage in what is supposed to be fatally flawed ways. Journalists are already in trouble as a function of recent changes in our larger technological and media environment/landscape, which makes the "fake news" talking point feel like overkill. If the news is fake, it is fake the way the best anthropology is fake, "really made up" so as to show us how we fashion ourselves into collective existence in the most compelling way possible.

All ethnographers are liars, but we are not alone. And it is important to remember that the ethnographic project is susceptible to some of the same pressures recasting our larger public culture. The erosion of trust in the news media and in science (from dismissals of climate change to conspiracies about vaccines)

help to explain what ethnography looks like perched rather precariously at the center of a Venn diagram where those two institutional formations (journalism and science) might be said to meet. Moreover, the increasing polarization of public discourse all around the globe maps quite interestingly onto the polarization of contemporary scholarly debates, with quantitative social scientists and qualitative social scientists often participating in radically different conversations (their own echo chambers) and openly hostile to proclaimed limitations of the other domain's epistemological and methodological presuppositions.

In the context of an increasing public dismissal of science and journalism as little more than partisan/ideological propaganda, is there some way to make a case for the ongoing value of relatively neutral players/arbiters/chroniclers/storytellers on issues of fact and truth in contemporary society? Can any organization/expert/authority claim enough independence, reliance on empirical reality, and aspirational objectivity to serve as an honest broker in our increasingly politicized public conflagrations? To use an admittedly too-simple baseball metaphor, who can be trusted to just call "balls" and "strikes"? Is there any way to regain public confidence in societal institutions aimed at doing just that—calling the sociopolitical equivalent of balls and strikes—even as we remain conscious of the fact that science and journalism (and ethnography!) are cultural practices that don't have any special or magical access to undeniable truth?

Ethnography is a literary genre and methodological approach that thrives in educating people about the complicated and inextricable interconnections between subjectivity and objectivity, fact and opinion, politics and scholarship. It isn't one-size-fits-all—that is, different ethnographers walk the tightrope between such

polarities quite differently. But the fact that ethnographers are willing to call attention to their subjectivities is an incredibly important point. To own up to the human partiality that makes us cultural liars, no matter how empirically rigorous the groundwork our claims rest upon, and to tell inevitable lies in ways that resonate with what we think we have come to know and trust about the observable world are, in many ways, the nearest scholarly interventions get to virtue.

Of course, lying isn't virtuous simply because one has convinced oneself of that lie's verity. George Costanza, one of Jerry Seinfeld's often hilarious sidekicks on the comedian's eponymously titled 1990s sitcom, *Seinfeld*, and played with zany virtuosity by Jason Alexander, offered up the most cited line in that hit show's almost decade-long run. Explaining why he is a breathtakingly masterful liar, George tells Jerry, in an assuredly relaxed and self-confident tone, his arm outstretched casually along the back of a booth at the fictional Manhattan eatery, Monk's Café, "Jerry, just remember: it's not a lie if you believe it." Almost as a kind of teaser for the master class George could surely teach on effective dissimulation, he offers this tidbit to explain his own dexterity with dishonesty. Jerry takes the advice in, pauses for a second, and then nods knowingly, as though the deep philosophical point George has proffered will shore Jerry up for his attempt to beat a polygraph test at a local police station (over something as utterly innocuous as whether or not he watches the TV melodrama *Melrose Place*, which he is too proud to admit).

Any too-quick rhetorical move from the necessary fictions of urban ethnography in Harlem to the cockamamy advice of a fictional TV character set in a make-believe New York about two miles away has probably slid quite squarely into the absurd. But an

absurdist register may be just what the contemporary order requires. Baudrillard's "theoretical violence" is boldly absurdist in its eccentric and perplexing assertions about what constitutes the real world, almost as though to combine purposeful agitprop and disinformation campaigning with unwieldy nonsense and dizzying hot air. And all of this circulates globally within a new media technocracy that connects the planet's farthest flung fringe groups into an immediate communicative praxis, creating for them an overly robust sense of their own nonmarginality, regardless of how ridiculous their contentions might be, contentions about fake science (climate change), fake news (journalism), fake Americans (Latino drug dealers), or supposedly fake versions of anything else. These folks calling out "fakes" at every turn, often in conspiratorial tones, genuinely believe what they espouse, but stubborn believing doesn't make up for the fact that confident claims can pivot on longstanding investments in self-delusion and self-interested social exclusions. That is only part of what makes ethnographic forms of counterrepresentation as important as ever.

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CHAPTER 2

Deep fakes

GRAHAM M. JONES

Your gimmick is mediocre,
The jig is up, I seen you from a mile away…
—KENDRICK LAMAR

Too often in the history of the discipline, anthropologists, acting out the intellectual reflexes of liberal humanism, have entangled themselves in the hubris of exposing fakes. Masked ritual offers a prime example: Michael Taussig (1999, 2003) has analyzed a number of ethnographic accounts that write off the mask and the entire arena of ritualistic special effects of which it is a privileged part as trickery visited upon credulous dupes by cunning deceivers. Once the artifice was debunked, the ethnographer's work seemed done. There was little left to offer by way of interpretation. "The issue seems to me," Taussig writes, "not one of affirmation, but of *negation*," where the supernatural manifestation "is unmasked not as a symbol, not as a sign,

not as a substitute, but as a deliberately contrived fake" (1999: 141). It is surprising how often such negation can still insidiously stifle analysis.

To avoid repeating this error, it is perhaps important that we distinguish between two kinds of fakes, which I will provisionally call *mere fakes* and *deep fakes*. Mere fakes are inferior imitations of the real, counterfeits or phonies introduced into social settings to leverage an otherwise unearned advantage. The merely fake can be ingeniously deceptive, but it is ultimately an instrumentality whose appetitive motivations are never that mysterious. The deep fake is something different—the product of beguiling artifice, to be sure, but with symbolism that transcends whatever limited strategic advantage fakery might confer. Its uncertain motivations are wrapped in impenetrable layers of meaning. On closer inspection, it may begin to seem indistinguishable from culture itself—a web of significance we ourselves have spun, to follow Clifford Geertz's (1973: 5) lead a bit further. It is deception in which everyone can simultaneously play the role of addresser and addressee, deception in which everyone is implicated as both part deceiver and part deceived.

Intersections between mere fakery and deep fakery are particularly fertile, it turns out, for anthropological analysis. Sites where instrumental imitations enter into cosmological dramas reveal the mechanisms of cultural ontogenesis at work. For instance, in his study of the traffic in counterfeit brand-name clothing among street-hustling Ivoirian dandies, Sasha Newell (2013: 140) shows how "fakes" can be "treated as authentic sources of power and value, even when—or precisely because—the deceit is known to its targets and performers." Like the mask, these mere fakes become symbolically charged when brazenly

animated in performances of cosmopolitanism, connoisseurship, and modernity.

Another fascinating example comes from Winnie Won Yin Wong's (2014) ethnography of the global trade in mass-produced imitations of Western artworks hand-painted in Chinese workshops. Wong finds that, in the West, exoticizing representations of these Chinese painters as heteronomous sweatshop counterfeiters go hand-in-hand with commissions of their "fakes" by conceptual artists making effete metacommentary on the status of art. She shows how the Western art world uses Chinese fakes to sustain its necessary "myth" of the artist's

> *unalienated* labor as steadfastly as the price of art ascends. But… the value-laden apparatus on which the myth of originality depends reveals itself to be beholden to a set of false inequalities, one that trades in provincial exoticisms of true art and authentic selves. Universal values function, in the implicit claims of cosmopolitans, only as a moving goalpost that reinforces the insurmountable difference between appropriation and alienation, between the real and the fake. (Wong 2014: 237)

In exploring the creative agency and professional autonomy of the Chinese painters who mass-produce these fakes, Wong's ethnographic perspective again reveals complex interminglings of mereness and deepness.

* * * * *

Among the places one might further explore the interplay between mere fakes and deep fakes through this kind of anthropological lens, I focus in the rest

of this essay on the antics of one category of faker who, at least in the United States, has been the object of intense and ongoing cultural elaboration: the confidence man. The figure of the confidence man is no less American that the term itself, which dates to an 1849 *New York Herald* story; his special kind of fakesterism is the product of specific historical conditions, which have also imbued him with longstanding cultural appeal as an amoral archetype (Cook 2001: 201–2). Herman Melville's 1857 novel *The Confidence Man* distinguished the eponymous protagonist as the American culture hero par excellence, and it is to that book that I turn for the rest of my discussion.

A kind of national allegory set on a Mississippi riverboat called the Fidèle, the novel describes encounters between a shape-shifting confidence man (one is never quite sure how many distinct guises he assumes) and passengers who represent a bestiary of American types, a revel of American contradictions; one character refers to the lot of them as "a flock of fools, under this captain of fools, in this ship of fools" (Melville 1857: 21). Melville's picaresque is the perfect national fable, an American masterpiece of what Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) calls the "polyphonic novel," in which an authoritative, authorial voice is drowned out by a welter of competing perspectives and irreconcilable ideologies, expanding in proportion to the complexity of the heterogeneous social reality that it seeks to encompass.

The Mississippi itself is a crucially significant setting. The nation's largest river, it was a vital economic artery and source of wealth, as well as a destination in its own right for tourists and pleasure-seekers (Sir Edward Burnett Tylor would have been a convalescent tourist there around the time Melville was finishing the novel). Moreover, in 1857 the river, as a geographical boundary, was a politically charged

symbol for a transitional historical moment, signifying both the "manifest destiny" of westward expansion and the antebellum controversy over slavery, both key themes in the novel.

Melville's riverboat is a space of virtually anonymous sociability: "at every landing, the huge Fidèle … receives additional passengers in exchange for those that disembark; so that, though always full of strangers, she continually, in some degree, adds to, or replaces them with strangers still more strange" (Melville 1857: 8–9). A microcosm for a nation of colonists and immigrants constantly fanning toward the fringes of a retreating frontier in search of new fortunes and new beginnings, the Fidèle constitutes a liminal setting where identities can be shed and remade, where the confidence man is perfectly in his element.

That the confidence man should ply the decks of such a riverboat has a substantial basis in historical fact. In his colorful ethnography of American con artists written almost a century later, David Maurer explains:

> The ease with which people make travelling acquaintances may account for the great number of marks [i.e., victims] which are roped [i.e., lured into con games] on trains or ships. When a mark is off his home ground, he is no longer so sure of himself; he likes to impress important-looking strangers; he has the leisure to become expansive, and he likes to feel that he is recognized as a good fellow. The natural barriers to friendships with strangers come down. (1940: 116)

Insofar as the mark's own desire to promulgate an impressive self-image impels the confidence game (Goffman 1952), all people are in a way con artists—and

many of the "straight" passengers the confidence man encounters aboard the Fidèle prove crooked in their own right. Lucky for him: "a confidence man prospers only because of the fundamental dishonesty of his victim" (Maurer 1940: 16).

Who or what exactly the confidence man is, Melville never quite specifies. At times he is diabolical; at others, Christ-like (see Hyde 1998: 83). A mystical philosopher ironically warns the confidence man himself against keeping company with a certain Charlie Noble, whom he calls

> an operator, a Mississippi operator; an equivocal character. That he is such, I little doubt, having had him pointed out to me as such by one desirous of initiating me into any little novelty of this western region, where I never before traveled. And, sir, if I am not mistaken, you also are a stranger here (but, indeed, where in this strange universe is not one a stranger?) and that is a reason why I felt moved to warn you against a companion who could not be otherwise than perilous to one of a free and trustful disposition. (Melville 1857: 306)

What does it mean for *everyone* to be a "stranger," as the mystic says? Georg Simmel describes the stranger as someone who "is not radically committed to the unique ingredients and peculiar tendencies of the group, and therefore approaches them with a specific attitude of 'objectivity.' But objectivity does not simply involve passivity and detachment; it is a particular structure composed of distance and nearness, indifference and involvement" (1950: 404). Thus, the stranger "often receives the most surprising openness—confidences which sometimes have the character of a confessional and which would be carefully withheld

from a more closely related person." But this peculiar position of proximity and distance also subjects the stranger to "many dangerous possibilities" (1950: 405), marking him as an object of perpetual suspicion and potential recrimination. So what does it mean if this condition of estrangement is generalized to encompass all relationships in the "strange universe" of Melville's America?

Fellow travelers aboard the Fidèle face competing impulses to both trust and suspect one another, exaggerated by the conditions of anonymity. The confidence man knows how to exploit these contradictions perfectly, using suspicion to win trust and trust to disarm suspicion. Thus, on the verge of selling an opportunistic "good merchant" fake shares in the fictitious Black Rapids Coal Company, the confidence man, who, in a series of successive guises has been cultivating (and bleeding) this particular mark for a number of chapters, feigns candor:

> "Dear me, you don't think of doing any business with me, do you? In my official capacity I have not been authenticated to you. … I, being personally a stranger to you, how can you have confidence in me?"
>
> "Because," knowingly smiled the good merchant, "if you were other than I have confidence that you are, hardly would you challenge distrust that way." (Melville 1857: 84–85)

The confidence man's notion of *authentication* is fascinating here, taking us to the heart of how fakery functions. The fake is only possible when there are normative, conventionalized, institutionalized standards of conduct and evidentiary practices that the faker can manipulate. Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall (2005: 601) "call attention not to authenticity as an inherent

essence, but to authentication as a social process." Elsewhere, Bucholtz (2003: 408) calls authentication "the tactic … that produces authenticity as its effect." Just as the authentic is always performative, so too is the fake, employing and revealing the tactics whereby authenticity itself is achieved.

In the scene above, the confidence man ingeniously proves his sincerity by casting suspicion on his own authenticity. Following John Jackson (2005), then, we must also consider sincerity above and perhaps beyond just authenticity—and not only sincerity, but what we might also call *tactics of sincerification*. Sincerification displaces authentication, which, aboard the Fidèle is constantly deferred, there being always only other strangers to vouch for one's good character. Sincerity—perhaps the most privileged attribute of modern selfhood (Seligman et al. 2008)—becomes the primary currency of self-authenticating performativity.

The confidence man exploits the inherently dramaturgical nature of social life and, not surprisingly, theatrical imagery abounds in the novel. As one character says, "to do, is to act; so all doers are actors" (Melville 1857: 49). If this is so, then the confidence man represents the apotheosis of the essentially theatrical nature of the self. Maurer explains,

> confidence games are in reality only carefully rehearsed plays in which every member of the cast *except the mark* knows his part perfectly. … Furthermore, this drama is motivated by some fundamental weakness of the victim—liquor, money, women, or even some harmless personal crotchet. The victim is forced to go along with the play, speaking approximately the lines which are demanded of him; they spring unconsciously to his lips. … He is living in a fantastic, grotesque world which resembles the real

> one so closely that he cannot distinguish the difference. (1940: 108)

It follows from this that "a con man must have a good deal of genuine acting ability. … He must sense immediately what aspect of his personality will be most appealing to his victim, then assume that pose and hold it consistently" (1940: 147).

In Melville's narrative, the confidence man's fundamental amorality allows him to fold conventional instruments of establishing trust and accountability into his ploys. In an elaborate scheme to avoid paying the paltry price of a shave, the confidence man draws up a formal contract deviously requiring the ship's barber to "evince a perfect confidence in all men, especially strangers" (Melville 1857: 367). Upon signing the contract, the barber is trapped in a self-referential labyrinth: the confidence man will cover him for any losses he might incur from trusting strangers, but the confidence man, who saunters off without paying, is the stranger whom he, contractually speaking, can't mistrust.

Like a Socratic elenchus, the confidence man's conversations lead victims to a state of aporia that Melville repeatedly compares to theatrical enchantment. The confidence's man's manner of ensnaring the barber is "sort of magical," he evinces "the power of persuasive fascination—the power of holding another creature by the button of the eye" (1857: 365). This is charisma, telegenicity, the virtuosity of the actor. "In days after, telling of the night's adventure to his friends, the worthy barber always spoke of his queer customer as the man-charmer—as certain East Indians are called snake-charmers" (1857: 371).

* * * * *

One of the confidence man's principal antagonists—and eventual victims—stands out as singularly important in the conception of Melville's allegory: the Missourian, Pitch,

> a rather eccentric-looking person … somewhat ursine in aspect; sporting a shaggy spencer of the cloth called bear's-skin; a high-peaked cap of raccoon-skin, the long bushy tail switching over behind; raw-hide leggings; grim stubble chin; and to end, a double-barreled gun in hand—a Missouri bachelor, a Hoosier gentleman, of Spartan leisure and fortune, and equally Spartan manners and sentiments. (1857: 164)

The Missourian appears when the confidence man, in the avatar of an herbalist, has just tricked a tubercular miser into buying his nostrum Omni-Balsamic Reinvigorator. Engaging the herbalist in a protracted argument, the Missourian initially appears to epitomize a frontier spirit of extreme self-reliance and mother wit: "I have confidence in distrust" (1857: 168), he proclaims.

Pressed by the herbalist on the issue of slavery, the Missourian proves coarsely consistent in his philosophy of self-reliance: "Bad enough to see whites ducking and grinning around for a favor, without having those poor devils of niggers congeeing round for their corn" (1857: 174). He then issues a stinging indictment of the liberal-minded herbalist who, asked about abolitionism, grandiloquently expounds on the abstract principle of human equality. "Picked and prudent sentiments," the Missourian damningly responds (1857: 175). "You are the moderate man, the invaluable understrapper of the wicked man. You, the moderate man, may be used for wrong, but are useless for right."

The Missourian's unflinching bluntness and deep distrust of others seem to make him impervious to the

herbalist's unction, but in the next chapter the confidence man returns in a new guise, the Philosophical Intelligence Officer (P.I.O.), and twists the virtue of self-reliance into self-delusion. "A round-baked, baker-kneed man, in a mean five-dollar suit" who "obliquely" slinks with "a sort of canine deprecation" (1857: 176), the P.I.O. works for an employment agency that hires out servant boys to gentleman clients. The Missourian, who has already told the herbalist that he utterly mistrusts boys, just as he mistrusts men, unleashes a misanthropic torrent against the piteous P.I.O. "Truth is like a thrashing-machine; tender sensibilities must keep out of the way," he says (1857: 186). "I hope you understand me. Don't want to hurt you. All I say is … all boys are rascals."

Key to gulling a mark is reinforcing his "illusion of superiority" allowing him to "regard himself as a person of vision and even of genius," Maurer writes (1940: 111). In providing the Missourian with a perfectly servile nonentity against whom to vent his sense of self-satisfied superiority, the P.I.O. reveals that, in his performativity, the *confident* man is also a kind of confidence man. Proceeding to unfurl his agency's "scientific" (Melville 1857: 187) "philosophy of boys" (1857: 189) through a series of analogies, the P.I.O. does not so much convince the Missourian of the essential goodness of human nature as excite in him a thwarted and repressed optimism—that too being a distinctive frontier virtue. "If hitherto, sir, you have struck upon a peculiarly bad vein of boys, so much the more hope now of your hitting a good one." Eventually, Pitch not only pays the P.I.O.'s three dollar fee, but even volunteers extra money for his new boy's transit.

Returning to his senses in the following chapter, the Missourian ponders how "he, the philosopher, had

unwittingly been betrayed into being an unphilosophical dupe" (1857: 202).

> He revolves the crafty process of sociable chat, by which, as he fancies, the [P.I.O.] wormed into him, and made such a fool of him as insensibly to persuade him to waive, in his exceptional case, that general law of distrust systematically applied to the race. He revolves, but cannot comprehend, the operation, still less the operator. Was the man a trickster, it must be more for the love than the lucre. Two or three dirty dollars the motive to so many nice wiles? (1857: 202–3)

The Missourian faces what is most disturbing about Melville's dark vision: what is the confidence man's real motivation? Money alone seems an inadequate explanation for such lavish displays of ingenuity. The merely instrumental fake is here folded into the ritualistic realm of deep fakery, "world-making" fakesterism (cf. Hyde 1998). But what kind of world is this?

"Each society, each generation, fakes the thing it covets most," writes the art historian (Jones 1990: 13). If self-reliance—itself another form of confidence—is the paramount American virtue, then the confidence man enacts it like no other. One might even say that—compared to the Missourian, for instance—he's the *real* thing. Pursuing his simultaneously grotesque and sublime activities of self-reliant, self-referential self-making as an end in themselves, he achieves a kind of ethical and aesthetic perfection. Money is just a prop.

* * * * *

The narrative links the Missourian to what Melville terms "the metaphysics of Indian-hating" (1857: 224).

He is an example of the "backwoodsman" for whom "the sight of smoke ten miles off is provocation to one more remove from man, one step deeper into nature" (1857: 226). Charlie Noble explains that, such men, who indiscriminately kill Indians as a kind of instinctive raison d'être, "seem to America what Alexander was to Asia—captain in the vanguard of a conquering civilization." In the figure of the backwoodsman, the American ideal of self-reliance reveals its savage prerequisite: the expropriation of indigenous land and the extermination of indigenous people. Like the hypocritically charitable gentleman whose lily-white "hands retained their spotlessness" (1857: 54) despite the Fidèle's soot-streaked surfaces because a "negro servant's hands did most of his master's handling for him" (1857: 55), the American "nation's growing opulence or power" (1857: 226) depends on the backwoodsman's virtually unseen wages of terror.

"The tide of emigration, let it roll as it will, never overwhelms the backwoodsman into itself," Charlie Noble says. "He rides upon advance, as the Polynesian upon the comb of surf."

But what happens when it eventually does? What happens to this peripheral legacy of violence when the tides of optimistic expansion do begin to slosh against the edges of possibility?

The confidence man offers one answer. He foretells a "progress of genialization," akin to "the progress of Christianization" (1857: 277), that will civilize and subdue even the most recalcitrant of misanthropes, the backwoodsman.

> Now, the genial misanthrope, when, in the process of eras, he shall turn up, will … under an affable air … hide a misanthropical heart. In short, the genial misanthrope will be a new kind of monster, but still

> no small improvement upon the original one, since, instead of making faces and throwing stones at people … he will take steps, fiddle in hand, and set the tickled world a' dancing.

The confidence man's tone is hard to gauge here. Is this a trifle, a roundabout kind of confession, or a chilling prophecy? Probably it is all three at once. The telegenic monster he foresees may be none other than the confidence man himself in a new incarnation (his avatars always cross-reference each other), a rearrangement of the culture hero's basic characteristics in a new guise. His deep, perennial fakesterism represents cultural reproduction and regeneration. A striving nation that needs to constantly replenish its reserves of self-confidence, Melville seems to be telling us, will always find its confidence man.

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CHAPTER 3

Being false to oneself?

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Within the family of terms—mistakes, errors, infelicity, lies, deception, superstition—all of which contest any notion of a stable and bounded notion of "truth"—how might we think of being false to oneself? I hope that engaging the question of lying to oneself might add a new dimension to the anthropological discussions on fakery and deception. The possibility that one might lie *to* oneself (not *about* oneself) presents itself as a problem of philosophical grammar and not one that is receptive to empirical justification or negation—much as the incongruence of a sentence such as "It is raining but I do not believe it" lies in the impossibility of its formulation as a first-person present indicative statement. The issue as Wittgenstein taught us is not that such a statement would break any rules of linguistic grammar but that it would violate the conceptual normativity of the term "belief." In Wittgenstein's famous formulation, "If there were a verb meaning 'to

believe falsely', it would not have any significant first person present indicative" (Wittgenstein 1968: 190).

Often presented as a problem of self-deception, the discussion on being false to oneself clusters around concerns about the *consequences* of self-deception and its analogy with deception of others; epistemic issues around what it is to know; or inquiries into the nature of the self that can be deceived by itself (see McLaughlin and Rorty 1988). Lurking behind these cluster of issues is the picture of rationality and a model of responsibility that derives its scaffolding from judicial reasoning. Though these discussions are helpful in raising certain issues on the asymmetry between first-person and third-person perspectives, they end up forefronting the question of agency and rationality. I want to shift the emphasis from agency (e.g., is self-deception bad because it leads to an erosion of agency?)[1] to questions around the fabric of our experience. Does the process of knowing oneself necessarily entail bringing a third-person perspective on myself? Could I envisage the possibility that even documentary evidence that someone might bring before me on my past might fail to persuade me that this or that fact on what I was or did, can capture my sense of myself in the present? The question is not just around "facts." I might not contest the facts that have been produced before me, yet fail to see them as capturing the sense of who I am. From this perspective, the boundaries between being able to see facts in the world (with regard to third persons and second persons) and facts about oneself in a first-person way crosses the boundaries between self and the world at several points. I concede that there are no straightforward answers to these

1. See Baron (1988).

issues and hence I am content to see if some pathways could be opened to these vexed questions, rather than striving to give definitive answers.

There are two different paths I want to open in this discussion. The first opening is through Wittgenstein's notion of "aspect dawning" and second through revisiting a well-known scene in the *Shrimad Bhagavad Gita* when Arjun, the hesitant warrior hero, stands in the battlefield in the grip of uncertainty about the ethics of killing his own kinsmen. He is given a lesson by the divine charioteer Krishna about the opaqueness of what is before his eyes. My idea here is not so much to contrast a generic "Western" view with a generic "Indian" one, but to see how the work of time enters these scenes. We could, perhaps, put these scenes in a relation of commentaries on each other on the difficulties of trust in one's own experience. What is the status of truth in relation to self-knowledge when the conditions under which I can claim my own experience as "mine" recede from me? The danger to truth-speaking does not always come from its opposites such as lying but might come from its doubles—flattery, tact, civility, and expediency (Foucault 2012). I am interested in the scene of truth-telling in dialogue with oneself (or facing the truth) within the scene of both public action and intimacy. I start with Wittgenstein's scene of "aspect dawning" as a way of approaching how being able to see objects in the world one way or another might provide a lens with which to see oneself.

WITTGENSTEIN AND ASPECT DAWNING

While Wittgenstein's famous example of the duck-rabbit picture has been read by many as alluding to the economy of "seeing," it was Stanley Cavell's

genius to have shown that there is a deep connection between the discussion of "seeing" different aspects in the same picture and experiencing the same word through different nuances of meaning or sometimes as containing multiple meanings (Cavell 1979, 2010). The connection Cavell established between these two traits—"aspect blindness" and "meaning blindness"—lay in the similarity they evoked of going about one's life as if blind. But Cavell also asked if there was a difference in being blind to aspects of objects in the world (which kinds of objects?) and being blind to aspects of oneself. The comparison raised for him the insight that in Wittgenstein my attachment to my words serves as an allegory of my attachment to others. Why does Wittgenstein juxtapose the discussion on aspect blindness in a picture with the difficulty some have with experiencing the meaning of a word, not just using it as a tool of communication?

The discussion of "aspect seeing" is announced only in the second part of *Philosophical Investigations*, and since the text was published posthumously, there is a legitimate debate in the literature on the order in which the paragraphs pertaining to "aspect seeing" and "aspect blindness" should be read (Baz 2010; Mulhall 2010). Without engaging this debate here, I think all sides would agree that one important point in Wittgenstein's discussion is that he is not asking us to think of seeing something new as we *move* from one picture to another—say from the picture of the duck to another picture of the rabbit. Instead, he is asking, what allows a different aspect of the *same picture* to dawn on us? In other related examples to that of seeing a picture, Wittgenstein draws our attention to hearing a tune as a variation of an earlier one, or experimenting with saying a word to mean it otherwise (saying happy but meaning sad, for example). Does the fact

that the same written notations can be heard or played differently tell us something about musical experience? Does an experiment with words—saying them first with one expression and then with another—have something to do with the *physiognomy* of the word, rather than its dictionary meaning? All these examples make us think of what it is to sense something new when we look at something familiar, allowing a different aspect of a picture, or a tune, or a word, to dawn on us. The variety of examples Wittgenstein offers shows that visual experience is only one part of the discussion on aspect dawning—a larger question is how something new might emerge from something familiar? The point about familiarity evokes for me a definite sense that what is at stake here is the kind of familiarity that one has with oneself or with an intimate another, not familiarity with some impersonal fact such as the train schedule. I do not deny that this intimacy with another might well be my intimacy with an affective object such as my violin or with Cantor's diagonal argument and its elegance. The important point is that the familiarity with this other is of the kind in which my life is staked in this other. I hope to show that in such contexts the dawning of a new aspect might be felt as freeing or threatening precisely because it hooks into my desire for and fear of my attachments.

We might warn ourselves here against the temptation to think that the visual is privileged by recalling Wittgenstein's repeated cautions on the dangers of pictures. One danger lies in our becoming captive to a picture that lies in our language and ensnares us—the second, that our projections of the same word or picture into new contexts can go wild, become groundless, as when Wittgenstein thinks of language going on a holiday or as an engine that is idling. How do these

observations illuminate the question of self-knowledge and what it might be to bear false witness to oneself?

Much work on the first person has established that there is a basic asymmetry between the first person and second and third person (Moran 2001; Das 2015b), and Wittgenstein gives some unnerving examples of the dangers of imagining the self as (merely) one object among others—for instance, something I might mislay and then find as I might mislay and find my glasses or my keys. So, while I do not have to examine myself to *infer* whether I am feeling pain or feigning it, though I might legitimately ask that of another, there are other aspects of myself that are not transparent to me. The two dangers that Wittgenstein alerts us to pertain conjointly to how we see the world and how we see ourselves. Thus, if self-knowledge requires me to reengage my memories to come to terms with past events, I might fall into the grip of a delusion because I project my present concerns into my past, thereby giving a teleological orientation to my life. This might be because I dare not face what I have become—or in the case of a related danger, I might fail to detach myself from the captivity of a fixed picture of myself (say, of what a good Hindu wife is, or predetermining what desires I am entitled to have given a fixed grid on which I expect my life to move). One's past is not in the nature of a set of objectified events that one can simply recall: so what layers of deception might I add to events and how do I do that? Let us pause here to recapitulate the different ways in which the problem of self-deception or false witnessing to oneself might appear.

First, a dominant trend in the literature is to think of self-deception as a problem of false belief. Though the discussion in much of this literature moves around the question of whether self-deception can be modeled

on deception by others and the debate between intentionalists and deflationary (nonintentionalist) approaches, the more interesting question is whether self-knowledge is always a question of belief in the first place (see Edwards 2013). As mentioned earlier, Wittgenstein had already shown that the verb "believe falsely" cannot have a subject in the first-person present indicative tense.

Second, the question of self-deception might be posed with regard to a perspective we bring on our past actions. Garry Hagberg (2010) gives a fascinating account of Iris Murdoch's discussion of self-knowledge as a constant responsibility to move out of a frozen past kept in place by a picture we may have of ourselves, to a dynamic understanding of our past words, deeds, and relationships, that might appear in a new light because of the way our present leads us to recontextualize our past. What Murdoch is asking for, he says, is not a reflection on the intrinsic properties of isolated events but how they stand in relation to the *sense* of our life. Here, overcoming self-deception would appear to be the ability to take responsibility for one's past actions not simply in a mode of regret but also of acknowledgment. This issue might then animate debates all the way from the individual to the collective, for example, in relation to historic wrongs committed by nations or Empires.

Third, self-deception might also be entailed in how desire comes in the way of reading the words, body, or gestures of an intimate other. Nothing expresses this region of the issue better than the phrase in Hindi in which the closeness and distance between *dhoka diya* (deception inflicted by another) and *dhokha hua* (was deceived by myself) are expressed by a simple shift of verb. In my fieldwork among urban slum-dwellers, this aspect of self-deception was a constant refrain when

friendships were strained or when one learned in a one-sided love affair that one had misread what was concern, or pity, or even sympathy, as an expression of love. As one woman—asked to say what she regretted most in her life—said to me: "I could not then see and cannot still see if I was the one who deceived myself (*mujhe dhoka hua*) or if he had deceived me (*dhoka diya*), allowing me to think he loved me by his gestures and words." Here one touches on the physiognomy of words, and the experience of meaning that may go beyond the communicative function of words.

Fourth, and for me the most lethal form of self-deception, is the "moral blindness" that Cavell identifies with aspect blindness. The example that Cavell privileges in his discussion is Cora Diamond's discussion of the story by J. M. Coetzee of Mrs. Costello, an aging professor whose experience of the indifference her fellow humans bear toward the suffering of animals leaves *her* wounded—a wound I cover up, she says, under my clothes, but which is revealed in literally every word she says. Cavell takes this as an example of the "difficulty of reality," in which Mrs. Costello is overcome, mortally wounded, by the cruelty to animals processed in food factories, while for others these events are just passed over without turning a hair. In the course of a lecture, Mrs. Costello compares the cruelty to animals with the cruelty of Nazi camps, creating outrage in her listeners that she is fully aware of causing. While I cannot go into the full geography of the argument here, what I note is the importance of the issue that Mrs. Costello finds difficult to comprehend—viz. that one could be so blind to the suffering of human and nonhuman animals with whom one inhabits a milieu. Cavell calls this "soul-blindness" at one point (Cavell 2007: 281), although he complicates the issue by asking what might be lines of difference

in acknowledging the overwhelming knowledge of Nazi camps versus animal processing factories, and further, what is our culpability with regard to them? For instance, "aspect dawning" might make us take a different angle in seeing our actions (or inactions) with regard to cruelty or suffering. Earlier, we might have regarded those facts in our world as somehow not connected to us. Then a new aspect of our culpability might dawn on us.

Yet, as Cavell says, failing to see the duck and remaining stuck on the rabbit in the duck-rabbit picture is not comparable to remaining indifferent or feigning indifference to cruelty, or abuse, or violence as if it were an unremarkable fact of life. What kind of selfhood would have to be actively cultivated, or senses trained, in order to make oneself blind to this aspect of life? I take two examples from my field notes to show how words can bear false witness to the sense of a life lived with others and hence also to oneself.

A woman from a middle-class family, married to an army officer, would sometimes disappear within the house for days and then turn up with bruises that she attributed to domestic accidents. Yet it was obvious to everyone in her neighborhood that her husband was beating her, sometimes mercilessly, in fits of rage. Her daughter once said to me in despair—"we go to visit relatives—they serve tea and snacks—we eat—we all laugh and chat—end of evening—goodbyes—see you soon—yet everyone knows when we reach home my mother will be beaten up—why does no one confront my father?" [*Rishtedaron ke ghar jaate hain—vo chai dete hain—pakode samne rakhte hain—hum sab haste hain—gappe lagate hain—sham dhali- chalo bye, phir jaldi milenge—sab ko pata hota hai ke jab ghar pahuchenge to mammi ko zordar maar padegi—mere papa ko koi kuch kehta kyon nahin?*]

In discussing such situations in a focus group discussion, I found that when presented with an ethnographic vignette in which a scene is described, modeled on this case, most people said that men would be hesitant to confront the husband because he might immediately turn around and say—"Why are you interested? Are you having an affair with my wife? Who is she to you?" Women said it would be opening yourself to being insulted, for, such a violent man could easily resort to abusive insults (*gali galauj*), uttering words not fit for a respectable woman's ears. The most suitable action they could think of was to inform the relatives if they were friendly with the household or to limit interactions with them. Calling in the police was out of the question, because everyone knew that the police would either simply extort a bribe from the husband or might even side with the husband, sowing more seeds of disruption in the fragile harmony of the neighborhood. Of course, this discussion was of a hypothetical case. Actual cases of domestic violence in the neighborhoods I have studied sometimes do end up in police stations or courts of law. However, there are thin lines between action and inaction, so that neighbors are not so much indifferent to the violence as ineffectual because of the constraints of context.

The second case I describe is probably closer to the kind of issue relating to inordinate or overwhelming knowledge that Cavell and Diamond clearly struggle with in their writing. This is a case I have discussed elsewhere (Das 2015a) of a woman whose mother had said on her deathbed to her—"you have a lot to forgive me for." Even when she described this event years later, she had said to me—"*ye zulm tha*," "this was cruel"—and I asked myself, Why was a plea for forgiveness experienced as cruelty? For this woman, who as a child had borne in silence the sexual abuse of an uncle in

whose house her mother and she had lived as dependent relatives, this plea put into words had been more unbearable than years of silence on the part of her mother. It brought to light for her a new knowledge, viz. that her mother had always known that her child was being abused by her (the mother's) brother, but she had carried on as if nothing was happening. Yet how could she not know? The cruelty, as this woman described it, lay in the fact that her mother could even imagine that she could utter these words of apology at her death bed and they would be sufficient currency to buy peace among them. How did her mother imagine that this daughter could be so easily freed from her memories of a house in which every corner had carried lurking dangers from her uncle? Then there was further double-bind of not knowing how or whom to forgive. She could not understand, she said, what kind of woman she had become now—one who could just say to her mother, "yes, I forgive you," and then expect a whole lifetime of rage to be wiped out as if it were a mark on a slate? Or, could she say "no, I cannot forgive you," and live with the knowledge that she could not bring herself to forgive a dying woman? Somehow the idea that this was an aspect of her selfhood that dawned on her on the deathbed of her mother is inadequate if we think of the pictorial image of the duck-rabbit. But if we shift to Wittgenstein's analogy that the issue is the depth in which words reveal or conceal the wound she is carrying, then it makes sense to see that truth or falsity in relation to one's life goes beyond the family of terms such as error, mistake, or superstition that I started with. Rather, it becomes a question of rethinking entirely such moments in relation to how one is going to bear a certain kind of knowledge of what it is to live with others through falsity and truth.

KRISHNA'S COSMIC FORM

While I am not able to develop a full-fledged argument here on the issue of self-knowledge from the perspective of certain strands in Indian thought, I want to indicate the possibility of a different route to these issues through a reading of one episode in the *Srimad Bhagavad Gita*, the canonical text on detachment as a mode of action in Indian philosophy. This text continues to receive attention for its relevance to different kinds of political issues—for instance, the dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna has been recast as the debate between a thick consequentialist (Arjuna) and a proponent of deontological reasoning (Krishna) by Amartya Sen in his influential book on the idea of justice (Sen 2009). There is also a rich debate in India on whether Arjuna simply lost his nerve on the battlefield, and whether his anguish came from concern for his kin or simply the fear of incurring sin (see Anderson 2012). Unlike Anderson, though, I don't think that the important issue is to decide whether the *Srimad Bhagavad Gita* is a religious text or a secular one[2]—my main concern is that by placing labels such as consequentialist versus deontologist, these attempts at comparison fall into the trap of reading

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2. Already, influential scholars of Indian philosophy have put forward vigorous arguments against thinking that philosophical themes in Indian texts are purely functional to religious ideals (Daya Krishna 1991a, 1991b). Thus, it is irrelevant whether this is a religious text applied to philosophy or a philosophical text using religious vocabulary. These debates are not innocent, as Hegel's dismissal of the Bhagavad Gita as a religious text rather than a philosophical one shows (see Spivak 1999).

what were major issues (say on the nature of action [Freschi 2010], or relationality versus solitude of the self [Mukerjee 1971]) as if these were early premonitions of theories that were to be more fully developed by Western theorists.[3]

The main plot of the *Mahabharata* is well known and I will only allude to one specific scene pertaining to the hesitation of Arjuna and Krishna's response to it. Seated on his chariot with Krishna as the charioteer, Arjuna is confronted with the sight of the two armies arrayed against each other in readiness for the war about to be waged. Arjuna is suddenly overcome with doubt that the war, however just, is against his own people—cousins with whom he played as a child, uncles, teachers—each name, as he recites it, brings a region of the past into the present moment. Krishna then shows him his cosmic form as a way of taking away the hold of the present moment for Arjuna, who now sees the present moment or the phenomenological moment as being eaten up by Krishna in his cosmic form. In Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1999: 37–67) profound reading, "Being is being-eaten. The graph of Time is devouring of time as timing" (1999: 55). She goes on to say that the human agent in his present-in-time (in the here and now) can no longer trust the here and now as the concrete ground of verifiability. Leaving aside the other threads of this argument, I want to simply point out that the image of being eaten by time, mistaking what is static and what moves (it is not time that is passing but we who are passing away, says

3. My argument is not that one cannot use such designations to express concerns that run through the debates in classical Indian philosophy, but that, in making these translations, what were issues of concern, say, to the Mimamsa scholars, are completely eclipsed.

Bhartrihari) shows, among other things, the delusional character of what we take to be our experience. If delusion is the primitive condition of our being, then the question for the philosophers might have been, How might we bring a different vision of the self to bear on ourselves? Krishna might appear as the impersonal spectator in the scene at the battlefield, but when he has to face Gandhari, the queen who is mourning the death of all her children and who tells him "you could have stopped the war," the ideal of detachment is considerably dimmed. In the play, *Andha Yug*, we can hear her rage against Krishna as cited in Das (2012):[4]

> What have you done Krishna! What have you done!
> If you wanted … You could have stopped the war…
> You may be a god … You may be omnipotent
> Whoever you are…
> I curse you and I curse all your kinsmen.

Krishna accepts the curse, which then leads to the complete extinction of his lineage while he himself is killed like a wild animal in his old age. What is haunting, though, is the depiction of what Krishna has taken upon himself in this terrible war. He says:

> In this terrible war of eighteen days,
> I am the only one who died a million times.
> Every time a soldier was struck down,
> Every time a soldier fell on the ground.
> It was I who was struck down,
> It was I who was wounded,
> It was I who fell to the ground.

4. See Das (2012) for a fuller discussion.

The prince who has been able to make war due to this education he receives from Krishna, his divine teacher, must in the end ask himself what it is to live within the time of human error or illusion (*maya*)—the reality of the affect here and now asserts itself in the vision of the grieving wives of the dead warriors, his aunts, his surrogate mothers. In the end, I think that aspect blindness does not quite do the work that contemplating the grip of blindness to which Arjuna has been subjected asks us to do. The rendering of the dialogue between Arjuna and Krishna as simply rational argumentation (as in Sen and Anderson) does not work because they assume that arguments come to an end at this point, but the text shows us that they do not. The horrors that one comes to live with and tolerate—horrors such as Arjuna experienced at the thought of killing his kinsmen—do not get settled by arguments alone. The falsities of the kind that ensnare us, much like skepticism, cannot be overcome in one decisive moment but the flashes of recognition of how we deceive ourselves could be put into continuous work, of which aspect dawning (versus aspect blindness) is one modality; the restoration of the everyday (versus the desire to escape from it) is another; and the desire to acknowledge our connectedness versus the desire for solitude—for all give and take to be over—is yet another. Self-knowledge and self-delusion take their place within these kinds of tempos and not outside them.

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CHAPTER 4

Fake as knowledge and relationship

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In his *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*, Ludwig Wittgenstein writes that a good theory of magic should "preserve its depth," not simply condemn it as a mistake from the point of view of rationality. This "cancelling of magic"—he adds immediately after—would "have the character of magic itself" (Wittgenstein [1967] 1979: 1). Wittgenstein captures here one of the more deeply rooted ambitions of social anthropology: to reach a rational understanding of the forms of thought that we find enacted in ethnography. But he also adds that a simple refutation, from a rational point of view, would not be a way to make the effects of magic disappear. Maybe there is here a useful analogy with fakery. We all know that to prove that a statement made by a "fake" enunciator is not true, has, very often, no efficacy. A certain kind of untruthfulness seems, on the contrary, inherent to the success of

this kind of message. Let us take only one example, among many others, drawn from contemporary politics. Geoffrey Kabaservice, a political historian, has recently remarked that: "President Trump has triumphantly succeeded in turning politics into spectacle, transforming the complicated process of government into something more like a made-for-TV drama. A lot of his supporters care more about the fight than the results, and the sense that the whole production is faked only adds to their enjoyment" (2017: 23).

Kabaservice adds several examples of these self-evident "obvious falsehoods" where a certain sense of fakeness did not prevent people believing in them. For instance, he writes that "many American far-right groups in the 1950s maintained that President Dwight Eisenhower, a Republican, was a dedicated, conscious agent of a Communist conspiracy. ... Other groups declared that the United Nations was training African cannibals in Georgia for an armed takeover of the United States, or that a committee of the University of Chicago eggheads was rewriting the Constitution to deprive Americans of their right to vote" (2017: 23). A list of examples of this kind could become rapidly endless. They all tell the same story: in order to understand fakery, we have to understand the manner it has—to use again Wittgenstein's words, to "preserve its depth"—and, therefore, to resist refutation. We won't understand fakeness without understanding its magic.

Before trying to formulate an explanation of this kind of magic, and appreciate the kind of communication (and knowledge) it typically conveys, let me describe, very briefly, the point of view I am adopting here. My starting point is that people share interesting forms of communication that are not easily predictable from a purely theoretical point of view. Like

other anthropologists interested in the anthropology of communication, I have tried to study some examples of these special communicative contexts in cultural transmission. Of course, it is impossible to refer here to the details of these analyses (see, for instance, Severi 2004, 2014, 2015). But the main idea can be formulated briefly. My attempt has been (and still is) to formulate a Pragmatics that would prove able to account for the kind of complexity that characterizes cultural communication, in terms of the mobilization of verbal and nonverbal means of expression, and in terms of the definition of a special “deictic field” (in Karl Bühler’s sense; Bühler 1990), which defines the “I,” the “Here,” and the “Now,” of a given utterance. This means that, if one chooses this perspective, two levels of communication should be explored: one is the generation of meaning through the use of language, and the other is the kind of communicative interaction in which this meaning is conveyed. Nothing can be done, in this field of analysis, without fieldwork.

My second point is theoretical. Dan Sperber has formulated two both influential and controversial theories. One concerns the role of relevance (defined, in Paul Grice’s terms [1991], as the research of the speaker’s intentions in order to understand the meaning of a sentence) in verbal and nonverbal communication (Sperber and Wilson 1986). The other concerns the many ways representations propagate in a society and the possible redefinition of social anthropology as an epidemiology of ideas (Sperber 1985). Since their first formulation, both theories have been variously discussed and developed. Both have advantages and disadvantages, and both may be criticized or praised for many reasons.

Still, it seems to me remarkable that no one has attempted to identify a possible relationship between

these two theories. What we probably need most today is precisely to find the point of articulation of two points of view, one focused on the microanalysis of single statements (verbal or nonverbal), the other focused on the study of the dynamics and structures of contexts of communication. In short, we should become able to tell how specific forms of conversational exchange (or specific forms of verbal and nonverbal communication, requiring a special pragmatics) generate specific kinds of propagation of representations in a given society. There lies, I think, the main problem that an anthropological theory of cultural communication should solve.

The study of fake communication could be an interesting test case for this new approach. What kind of knowledge is fake knowledge? How is it propagated, and how does it acquire the semblance of truth? What kind of relationship between speaker and addressees underlies fake communication? In this very brief intervention, and using Wittgenstein's remarks about magic and its "depth," I would like to offer an answer to these questions. Let us start from a dictionary definition. If we look, for instance, at the *Oxford Dictionary*, we find that "to fake is to alter as to deceive, to feign in order to make something presentable or plausible."

There are two aspects in this definition. One is propositional and organized around the opposition between true and untrue. From this point of view, to fake, as a verb, means "to make plausible what is untrue." However, to fully understand this concept, we need to adopt a further perspective, and look at this concept from a relational point of view, in order to understand what kind of communication game (Airenti 2010) is played when one makes such an attempt. In order to sketch in a first idea of what the structure of "fake communication" might be, let us compare it with a situation we anthropologists are familiar with: a dialogue

with one of our interlocutors, as it might happen during fieldwork. Six points might be relevant here.

1. Anthropological knowledge is (or should be) always generated by a very specific kind of encounter, which we call fieldwork. Fieldwork is a rather vague term for designating a variable and complex situation, but it always requires the establishment of an ethic of the relationship. A link (and a certain commitment to truth) has to be established, both on the side of the anthropologist and on the side of her/his interlocutors.
2. This relational ethics does not coincide with the concept of "truth," in the logical sense of the term. Fiction, false (sometime even meaningless) statements like "white lies" (or even partial truths) are always to be found in our dialogues with the people we pretend to study. Sometimes, they might even be required by the situation as essential elements in a process of mutual construction of meaning. Enunciating, explicitly or implicitly, a "white lie" in the right moment can be a way for strengthening a relationship, not necessarily a way to threaten it. When I am invited to share a glass of water with a friend in a village where the water comes from an unsafe source, I would naturally pretend that the water *is* safe—even if I am (and, very probably, both of us are) perfectly aware that it is not. To affirm the truth, in this case, would be entirely inappropriate. This seemingly minor point is essential. I would argue that where and when ethnography can pretend to a certain kind of reliability, it is precisely because a common commitment to truth of this kind (constantly renegotiated, and constantly assuming stable or unstable, conflictive or peaceful forms) has been established.

3. It is important to note that this is the case even when the people we work with adopt various forms of "serious fiction" (Bateson 1972), framed for instance in statements like "this is what we see, or what we believe, or what we do when we perform a ritual, or we tell a story." These forms do not contradict the common commitment to truth that governs fieldwork on both sides. In these cases too, where the notions of "truth" and "falsehood" become obviously less useful, the sincerity of the relationship is a precondition of any interpretation of what is communicated, and replaces the commitment to the literal "truth" of the words spoken. Let us provide a very brief example, drawn from the beautiful description Milan Stanek (1983) and Florence Weiss (1981, 1987) have given of the Naven (a ritual famously studied by Gregory Bateson in the 1930s) as it was celebrated in the early 1970s, in the Iatmul village of Palimbei (Papua New Guinea).

> Seeing that her son was trying out the anthropologist's motor boat for the first time, the mother slowly began dancing in the garden where she was tending her plants. She exclaimed: "My son! *It's you, my ancestor*!" The boat sped over the water, arching over the waves of the river. The mother took a yam as an ornament: a symbol of her clan (and showed it to the boy). (Stanek 1983: 158)

Is the statement "My son, you are my ancestor!" true or false? Stanek (1983), and Bateson (1936) before him, have shown that this kind of question may rapidly become irrelevant to the understanding of what the mother was saying. To put it briefly,

the task of the anthropologist here is to show that this specific utterance does not work as a description of the world but rather as a verbal mask of the speaker. Reversing the role of the mother, who paradoxically defines herself as the "daughter" of her son, this utterance manifests the transformation of the speaker and of the addressee, through a sequence of ritual identifications, where the mother imitates her ancestor's behavior while identifying him with her son (Stanek 1983: 158). The enunciation of this statement ritually *transforms the relationship* between son and mother in a very significant way (Houseman and Severi 1998). In order to understand this kind of communication, the anthropologist has to show that behind an apparently meaningless statement, there is a crucial signal concerning the kind of paradoxical link that is established, in this ritual, between mother and son. The kind of truth the ethnographer can offer, even when it concerns "serious fiction," is founded upon an experimental commitment to truth that concerns a relationship between persons, not an abstract concept of truth or falsehood.

4. This distinction between the meaning of a statement and the kind of interaction that it enacts may become methodologically useful when we try to answer the questions I have posed about fake knowledge. Fake knowledge is actually very often factually false, but it is only partially composed of untrue statements. It has also an intrinsic relational nature. To be fake is not only "telling lies." It is to be disloyal to the ethic of the relationship. A faker is not only "wrong" because usually he or she "does not tell the truth." S/he is someone who tries "to make presentable" not only false statements (as the *Oxford Dictionary* says), but also a biased

relationship. Maybe a first aspect of the "magical power" of fakery (what Wittgenstein would have called "its depth") lies in the concealment of this fact.

Pure concealment, however, is too weak a concept for understanding the remarkable efficacy of fakers. Let me offer another reason, still formulated from a relational point of view: fakers are effective not (only) because of what they say but because they have specific ways to elaborate the image of the speaker. Their power lies in the construction of a certain kind of identity.

5. Let us try to better understand this point. A familiar situation in which a "special" identity of the speaker is produced is a theatrical performance, and, actually many attempts have been made to understand fakery as a sort of theatrical fiction. I think that this analogy has to be qualified. Suppose, for example, that in a performance of Christopher Marlowe's magnificent *Tamburlaine the Great* ([1590] 1950), an actor playing the role of the cruel emperor declaims the following verses:

> *I hold the Fates bound fast in iron chains*
> *And with my hands turn Fortune's wheel about,*
> *And sooner shall the sun fall from his sphere*
> *Than Tamburlaine be slain or overcome.*
> *Draw forth thy sword, thou mighty man-at-arms,*
> *Intending but to raze my charmed skin*
> *And Jove himself will stretch his hand from heaven*
> *To ward the blow and shield me safe from harm.*
> (Marlowe [1590] 1950, *Tamburlaine*: act 1, scene 2)

Given that, by definition, the public considers that the actor is just playing the role of Tamburlaine,

the identities of the emperor and the actor are clearly distinct and mutually exclusive. The actor, the image of the character who appears on stage, may be identified either as "Tamburlaine the emperor" while he expresses his defiance, or else as Mr. X, the famous Elizabethan actor. The emotions and thoughts that he expresses, and even some of his physical features such as the charmed skin that he claims to possess, are, naturally, attributed to the emperor, not to the person interpreting the role of Tamburlaine. In the theater, those two identities are bound to alternate, because the context allows no confusion and keeps them in a relationship of reciprocal exclusion. When I believe in Tamburlaine, and I see him on stage, I do not recognize the actor, and vice versa. The perlocutionary effect of this situation is clear: during even the most successful interpretation of the dramatic character, no confusion as to the identity of the actor on stage is possible, for when we enter the theater, we accept without difficulty the type of relationship to the fiction that this kind of representation implies.

The problem with the faker (and the difference with the theatrical situation) is that, in the image of the faker these identities are blurred by the confusion operated between the propositionally defined (semantic) identity of the faker and the kind of relational play he or she is playing. Thus, what seems typical of faking is, on the one hand, the hiding of one's real identity, and on the other, a certain way of giving the interlocutor the impression that he or she is very similar to the listener—and thus worthy of their trust.

How does this sense of familiarity emerge? There is an obvious way to achieve it, and we have

already seen it used (as in our Trump example) in politics or in entertainment: to adopt the mask of a "common believer." This process is relatively simple: all kinds of extravagant rumor (like the one quoted by Kabaservice [2017] about African cannibals being trained in Georgia) are circulating all the time in our societies. Many people believe in them. In order to capture the trust of the already-believers, you can simply *repeat* the rumors they believe in. By this simple act of "giving voice" to these rumors, you will achieve two effects: the first is that your "real" identity will be "blurred" into the collective community of the "already-believers." The second effect is that you will acquire the appearance of being "similar" to the believers. You become almost automatically "one of them" because you share the same belief. The simple repetition of a rumor triggers a sort of mimesis between speaker and addressee that partially accounts for the effectiveness of the fake message.

6. This type of intentional mimesis, very common in entertainment, is just a superficial effect of a deeper phenomenon. In order to describe it, we can use another analogy. In his essay on marionettes, the German writer Heinrich von Kleist ([1810] 1994) observed that to "give life" to the puppet, the puppeteer executes an extremely simple gesture, which does not have a direct, immediate relationship with the movements the doll will then be able to make. The attitudes, leaps, bounds, attacks, and fights that give an illusion of life and dominate the figure's behavior certainly depend on a balancing of weight and counterweight of the puppet's different body parts. But they also depend on numerous acts of projection on the spectator's part, which transform the physical gestures and positions of the

puppet into the "states of mind" attributed to it: anger or love, hesitation or enthusiasm, aggression or friendship. Only then will the puppet be seen as alive. Indeed, the puppet has an internal mechanism that presides over its function and specific iconographical identity. But it is incontestable that the thoughts such a mechanism provokes (in a way that often surpasses the will of the puppeteer) are also to be included in the puppet's constitution. One could say that a puppet, when perceived as alive, is the product of a cooperation between the puppeteer and the viewer. The living artifact is a creation of their interaction.

The image of the fake speaker evidently works in a similar way. We may conclude that a belief is shared (and thus, easily propagated) not when its content is true or false, but when the message conveying it is coconstructed by the enunciator and her/his addressees. The same holds true for the identity of the faker. The complexity and success of the "fake behavior" are thus explained by three factors: the meaning of what is said, the communicational structure that links the speaker and her/his addressees, and finally the co-construction of the identity of the image of the speaker. Maybe the "magic" that enables fake communication, in Wittgenstein's words, "to preserve its depth" even against fact-checking and propositional truth, lies in the conjunction of these three factors.

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CHAPTER 5

Exposing fakes

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Exposing fakes, debunking fakes, revealing fakes; but also, a class of nouns: Exposing-fakes, debunking-fakes, revealing-fakes; that is to say, fakes may be exposed, but also expose; they may be debunked, but also debunk; both distort truth, and reveal it. As Marcus Boon puts it, "Deceptive action aims at a temporary advantage, which may end with exposure, but which may also be sustained by further lies. The copy rests within this web of deception, yet it is equally available to those who pursue the truth" (2010: 128). Hoaxes, in particular, and as is well known, frequently lie in order to tell the truth (Fleming and O'Carroll 2010: 58)—at least, that is what the moralizing hoaxer claims. But what will be revealed? Quite possibly, further obscurations. Will the duped be persuaded? Their investment in the deception might preclude this; perhaps they already knew but didn't care, complicit,

perhaps, with the fraudster in the seductive mutual knowledge of falsehood (the lies they were told being, so to speak, *their* lies; Jacobson 2017: 72, 110).

Art critics and historians have argued that exposing fakes in the form of artwork forgeries is necessary in order to preserve an accurate understanding of past societies (Gamble 2002): "Forgery is not a victimless crime, even if the forger is successful and 'no one knows.' For the real victim is then our general understanding of the history of art and of human vision" (Dutton 1998). A public good, knowledge is protected through the work of exposé. Though the argument makes sense from the art historian's point of view, such a perspective apparently discounts the work of exposé as itself a possible object of knowledge, whose forms might be similarly subjected to historical and social analysis. I offer a preliminary sketch of several modes and logics of the exposé of fakes, which must include revelations of truth and knowledge precipitated by fakes themselves.

LOGICS OF EXPOSÉ

Nowadays, in anthropology and adjacent disciplines, projects of exposé and debunking usually (though certainly not always[1]) receive a bad press. This was not

1. Most strikingly, they do not receive bad press when their object is secularity itself. For instance, the secularity of anthropology has by now been exposed or unmasked as essentially theological in essence a few times over (e.g., Herbert 1991; Asad 1993; Sahlins 1996). By no means always dismissive in tone, such accounts have nonetheless served a debunking role, and have contributed to a suspicion of the secular that prepared

always the case: as E. B. Tylor (1871: 410) memorably put it, "the science of culture is essentially a reformer's science," and the task of the anthropologist is to "expose the remains of crude old culture which has passed into harmful superstition, and to mark these out for destruction." More recently, exposing the shakiness of claims to authenticity made on behalf of pernicious forms of nationalism and tradition was, and sometimes still is, seen to be politically necessary. Richard Handler's (1988) elegantly "destructive" ethnography of Quebecois nationalism is exemplary here. Meanwhile, in places marked by notorious injustices, the work of exposing human rights abuses can seem like the only appropriate response. Robert Gordon and Andrew Spiegel (1993) described how many ethnographies produced during apartheid-era South Africa, animated by a sense of moral outrage, constituted a distinct genre of ethnographic writing: that of "exposé anthropology." The edited collection *The Invention of Tradition* (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), which "exposed" the frequently recent provenance of cultural traditions otherwise portrayed as historically rooted and authentic, is the most prominent reference point of all here. However, as Nicholas Thomas (2002: 415) explains, if "the 'debunking' style of this criticism was initially refreshing," it soon became clear that "such arguments relied in some cases upon the same notions of 'authenticity' that they might overtly disavow, and presumed the unique validity of Western ways of knowing the past, effectively discounting local historical understandings." Especially in anthropology, whose practitioners "are

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the ground for recent anthro-theological interest in far more antagonistic readings of secularity as a fraudulent Christian masquerade (see Hagström forthcoming; Copeman and Hagström 2018).

expected to take a charitable line on the deeply held convictions of the people they write about" (Spencer 2002: 592), projects of exposé can provoke considerable discomfort. While exposing cases of corruption or injustice is not, of course, the same as exposing the (re) invention of traditions, the analyst in each case grants him or herself the privileged stance of unveiler.

If, in anthropology at least, there is now broad agreement about the reductiveness of "the 'debunking' style of criticism," the matter is still not closed. Proponents of "the ontological turn," for instance, define their approach partly in opposition to a tradition of sociological critique, which, "in skeptically debunking all ontological projects to reveal their insidiously political nature, ends up affirming the critical politics of debunking as its own version of how things should be" (Holbraad, Pedersen, and Viveiros de Castro 2014). Ontological politics is different, its proponents explain, involving instead "the non-skeptical elicitation of [the] manifold of potentials for *how things could be*" (Holbraad, Pedersen, and Viveiros de Castro 2014). The difference between the "should" of debunking and the non-normative "could" of ontological politics is all important. Bruno Latour similarly considers scholarly debunking a practice of "critical barbarity" (2004: 240). The enlightenment concern with matters of fact, he suggests, was "excellent for debunking quite a lot of beliefs, powers, and illusions" (2004: 232). Yet this concern was "totally disarmed once matters of fact, in turn, were eaten up by the same debunking impetus" (2004: 232). It is by way of Latour proposing instead a critical focus on "matters of concern" that he, by obviation, provides an interesting definition of the logic of exposé as the impulse toward *subtractive antifetishism*. "Antifetishistic" because debunking requires lifting "the rugs from under the feet of the naïve believers"

as a means of undoing the "false relational projections" imposed by "culture" on top of objective reality ("nature") (Harman 2010: 75). "Subtractive" because it deducts reality from matters of fact, rather than adding to them (Harman 2010). In contrast to a debunking that eats itself, to approach matters of concern is to protect and to care for the phenomena described. Following from this, the kind of critic Latour appeals for "is not the one who debunks, but the one who assembles." If something is constructed (invented), says Latour, "then it means it is fragile and thus in great need of care and caution" (2004: 246).

Attractive though Latour's phraseology is, the argument doesn't particularly move us forward: should we really be nurturing and caring for, say, the nationalisms and attendant violences destructively analyzed by Handler and others? The argument is also, so to speak, somewhat subtractive. A problem with the word "subtraction" is that it risks directing our imagination to a negative project of eliminating or removing something, when one should leave open the possibility that such movements (because they frequently do) first require a positive or productive epistemological operation that enables the "subtraction"; viz., before specific phenomena can be perceived as "fetishes," a source domain of the "fetish" must be created that makes possible this perception in the first place—or they may be the same conjoined movement, such that to dispose of a fetish is simultaneously to elaborate the category of "fetishes" (see Jones 2010 on source domains). Might debunking in fact operate as a positive precursor to the creative birth of new forms? Might debunking itself take on diverse and creative forms? This is not the place to attempt full answers to these questions, but the remainder of the piece might at least begin to show that the primary value of Latour's argument lies

more in the elegance of its exposition and provision of useful vocabulary than its soundness. My purpose, it should be clear, lies not in advancing projects of exposé but in seeking a richer understanding of them.[2]

In sketching the contours of a "critical politics of debunking" (Holbraad, Pedersen, and Viveiros de Castro 2014) in an ever-enlarging fakescape, it quickly becomes apparent that debunking and exposé take on a bewildering array of forms, but also that disciplinary resources abound for analyzing them. Most obviously, such an exercise might draw inspiration from recent attempts to delineate an anthropology of critique (Boland 2013), meditations on the nature of evidence and production of truth (Engelke 2008; Kelly and McGoey 2018), and studies of the ethics of deconstruction (Siebers 1988). Work on the "rendering visible" of audit and accountability practices is also of relevance, especially the apparent paradox (framed by Peter Pels) of how "the stated goal of making the inner workings of organizations more visible goes together with a positioning of the audit process itself as an increasingly private and invisible expert activity" (Pels 2000: 142). Of a piece with William Mazzarella's (2006: 476) more general reflection concerning how new transparency measures tend to produce new opacities, Pels's observation helpfully avoids denuding the work of exposure of its inner intricacies. But, of course, while audit and unveiling share a purpose in rendering fraud, corruption, malpractice, and so on available for inspection, their characteristic temporalities starkly

2. An undertaking in some ways adjacent to Luc Boltanski's (2010: 46) shift toward developing a "sociology of critique," i.e., "a descriptive, sociological analysis of critique *in* rather than *of* society" (Larsen 2011: 41).

diverge: if the former makes visible through methodical routine, the latter draws a large measure of its power from the drama of the particular instant of exposure. Such an instant is analogous with, or perhaps a mode of, the moment of *anagnorisis* in narrative;[3] viz. concluding scenes of revelation and recognition that are as conspicuous in the works of Agatha Christie as in the plays of ancient Greece.

Clearly, recognition of truths need not be at all the same thing as debunking fakes—even if the latter may be intended to lead its audience to the former. The key distinction is that debunking is constitutively an act of criticism, whereas truth-telling need not be. Indeed, Tom Boland (2013: 231), drawing on an etymological study by Reinhart Koselleck, suggests that a significant shift in the structure of criticism from the "revelation of truth within crisis" to a practice of skepticism and exposé was roughly coterminous with the advent of the nineteenth century in Europe. At the same time, debunking false prophets and practices of worship is an ancient business indeed. As Eric Voegelin (2001: 494) observed of Jeremiah's critique of idolatry, the argument employed "is almost that of an Enlightenment philosopher who wants to dissolve superstition through information."[4]

Let us proceed now to a brief preliminary typology of logics and practices of exposé in the fakescape.

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3. The classic definition is Aristotle's in his *Poetics*, where he describes *anagnorisis*, or recognition, as a "change from ignorance to knowledge, leading to friendship or enmity" (1452a30–32).

4. And one can go beyond Christianity to earlier euhemeristic theory and Socrates's rhetorical debunking of myth as described in *Phaedrus*.

1. Fakes as truth-telling devices

Hoaxes and acts of disguise and imitation are by no means always valued negatively and may be employed in the service of "truth," as with the (not uncontroversial) use of placebo medicines in clinical trials, and dramatic impersonations that are essential for reaching climactic points of revelation of truth and transformation. Following from this, we can see that the work of exposing fakes frequently relies on *fakes that expose*, pitting, so to speak, deception against deception. If Jeremiah's critique was an instance of what Latour would call subtractive antifetishism, fetishes (fakes) may just as well join the antifetishistic cause. A recent example is the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, a mode of pseudo-deception since it is so obviously a parody religion.[5] Yet its purpose is serious. Not unlike the "didactic hoaxes" (Fleming and O'Carroll 2010) we briefly discussed earlier, which lie in order to tell the truth, the hyperbolic artifice of the

5. The church, also known as the Pastafarian movement, was founded by physics graduate Bobby Henderson in 2005. He had taken issue with the Kansas State Board of Education's decision to teach Intelligent Design as an alternative theory to evolution. He wrote an open letter supporting the decision to teach more than one perspective but insisting "that students also be taught a third perspective: the possibility that the Earth was created by a Flying Spaghetti Monster. As Henderson put it, 'I think we can all look forward to the time when these three theories are given equal time in our science classrooms across the country, and eventually the world; One third time for Intelligent Design, one third time for Flying Spaghetti Monsterism, and one third time for logical conjecture based on overwhelming observable evidence'" (Laycock 2013: 24). See Laycock (2013) for an excellent account.

Spaghetti Monster creed suggests the artifice of the religions it sends up: invention to reveal invention.[6] The parody religion is a fake, but not one that passes itself off as real, for knowledge of its fakeness is necessary in order to set up the necessary comparison between it and the established religions being parodied. Indeed, encouraging comparison by the observer is integral to critique's operation. Taking on, but also critically modifying, features of the object of critique is key. Similarly, for the Indian atheist activist who dons holy man-style saffron robes and flowing locks and performs "miracles," fakery is a conscious strategy—not at all the sincerest form of flattery, this is imitation to disarm and take down. Having amazed his audience, who took him for a holy man, the activist dramatically disrobes before demonstrating how these "miracles"—now revealed to be no more than tawdry tricks—can be performed by anyone.[7] Like Yukaghir hunters in northeastern Siberia who transform their bodies into the image of their prey all the better to catch and kill them (Willerslev 2004), atheist activists dress up as

6. The church relies on a "conception of religion [that] emerged during the early modern period in response to both the wars between Catholics and Protestants and colonial encounters with the cultures of Asia, Africa, and the Americas. Elements of other cultures were examined to determine whether they might constitute 'religion,' but the category itself was taken for granted. … By inventing religion 'as a second-order, generic concept', the Western world also provided the possibility to manipulate the criteria ascribed to this category in order to create absurdities" (Laycock 2013: 20).

7. See Copeman (2012) and Copeman and Quack (2015) on issues concerning gurus and imitation.

holy men all the better to unmask them; similarity is strategy. While we are squarely in the terrain, here, of enlightenment debunking and antifetishism, in both the cases discussed debunkers borrow from the phenomena they seek to debunk—a key strategic trait of the fake that exposes other fakes. Mobilizing "matters of fact" is not the only means of debunking.

There are other means, too, by which fakes may "tell the truth." In briefly recounting several instances of what might be termed a more extrinsic, unpremeditated variety of exposé, we shift to a domain where—unlike the carefully designed hoax—subjective intentions need not lie behind the revealing of truths. We find, instead, a kind of second order unconcealing. In a discussion of mate selection among rabbits, which draws heavily on the work of W. D. Hamilton, Richard Dawkins (2006: 305–6) asks whether, in order to assist males in being selected by females acting as "doctors," "will genes for faking good health be favoured?" At first this may be the case, but selection would act in turn on female rabbits to improve their ability to unveil the parasite-ridden, yet skillfully bluffing, male rabbit. In the end, suggests Dawkins, "females will become such good doctors that males will be forced, if they advertise at all, to advertise honestly." Faking good health, albeit in a convoluted manner and over some time, would lead eventually to (the telling of) "the truth."

Consider also the example of a "fake" blood donation event in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, in which political party activists sought the politically advantageous publicity of blood donation by posing for photographs "as if" they were donating their blood, but without actually doing so. While the Indian press carried a straightforward exposé of this unscrupulous behavior, a second order exposé is conducted, so to speak, by the fake itself. Significantly, the (non)event

formed part of a larger political field that had placed blood donation, and blood petitions, blood letters, and blood paintings at the center of mass political communication. Prior to this (non)event, it was already well known that blood donation camps organized by political parties were liable to be cancelled if a leader was unable to attend, and that if they did attend, they often broke up immediately on their departure. The example from Andhra Pradesh is of the same genus as such (abortive) camps, but its cynicism—its *actually* posed nature—seemed to dramatically reveal and underscore, by logical extension, the posed nature of the rest of the country's hematological politics. What was in any case gestural politics, here it was to be found, finally, in its "purest" fake form. The realization seemed to dawn: well *of course* the political activists' blood donations were fake—political parties only *take* people's blood.[8] Sasha Newell's (2013) work on brand *bluffeurs* in Côte d'Ivoire is another case in point. Discussing the conspicuous display of fake branded goods—another case of pseudo-deception since onlookers are well aware they are fake yet willing to suspend their disbelief—Newell argues that "local understandings of performative magic merge with anxieties about authenticity and modes of imitative reproduction at the heart of capitalist economies," shedding light on them (2013: 140). What the Ivoirian bluff does ultimately is to *expose* how "capitalist value in the global economy is itself a product of bluffing" (Newell 2013). No one is

8. The refrain "*Neta janata ka khuun chooste hain*"—"Politicians suck the people's blood" is a familiar one, certainly in the north of the country. A more detailed discussion of this episode may be found in Copeman and Banerjee (2019).

interested here in exposing fakes; it is fakes themselves that do that work.

2. Exposé as a species of rhetoric, debunking as a practice of freedom

The purpose of acts of debunking is to persuade their audiences of the falseness or hollowness of particular ideas, beliefs, or practices, and/or to inculcate in the viewer a self-reflexive critical disposition (Jones 2010). Debunking and exposé are therefore a species of rhetoric, a style of argument. Michael Carrithers (2005: 577), whose aim has been to rehabilitate rhetoric as both anthropological subject and method, seeks to explain humans' character "not so much as culture-bearing beings, but rather as something more, as culture-creating and -changing beings." Debunking reflects this emphasis well: many, if not all, of its forms seek to change culture ("improve" its quantum of truth). Debunking is more than just speech; as we have seen, it can involve creative juxtaposition, imitation to disarm, different techniques of vision. Peter Lamont's (2010) work on nineteenth-century psychological demonstration of error (e.g., belief in spiritualism) shows just how debunking can perform the work of rhetoric. As he puts it, "debunking has been used as an opportunity to persuade others of the importance of psychological knowledge, and the discursive deployment of a psychology of erroneous belief has been key" (2010: 38). The purpose of producing "rigid observations" to debunk assumptions informing, say, mesmerism, was precisely to persuade a "gullible public" not only of the illusionary nature of particular beliefs but also of the worth of psychological expertise (2010: 42). Similarly in the case of Indian atheist activists and their exposure of "fake miracles," the aim of their debunking is to persuade their fellow citizens

of the validity of science and "encourage a critical outlook amongst the people."[9] To open up the black box of debunking, then, is to find an array of tools, tricks, and skilled deployments of schema whose focus is on creating and changing culture: the stuff of rhetoric.[10]

And if, as anthropologists, we wish to pay attention to what people think they are doing when they are debunking fakes, we must also pay attention to questions of freedom. These same atheist activists see "the debunking of 'magical trickery' as a liberating exercise that enables the freeing of the 'backward' masses from the shackles of 'superstition'" (Srinivas 2015: 397). For Latour, this would be taken as pure conceit, but the connection between these liberating gestures and economic freedom is constantly made by activists: to be free from fake gurus and their fake miracles is also to be free from economic exploitation. Such actions take place squarely within the province of the enlightenment deployment of facts of matter to expose illusions, but are they reducible to "critical barbarism" if the destruction of knowledge is also a clearing of ground for new knowledge and/or the "exercise of freedom"?

The will to know, as we saw at the outset with reference to the work of Denis Dutton, is frequently at the heart of projects of unveiling fakes: if artwork forgeries remain unexposed, our knowledge of art history remains compromised. At a very prosaic level, university

9. Cited in Quack (2011).

10. See also Jesse Shipley's work on spiritual fakery in Ghana (2009), which foregrounds the rich diversity of means of unveiling: "Assessing fakery in performance is at the centre of a sphere of moral deliberation that is not defined by a particular medium. It moves across radio, television, theatre, comedy, preaching, and music, as both lament and entertainment" (2009: 524).

use of a technology of exposé (viz. plagiarism detection software) for checking student essays is a means for helping to safeguard both teachers' proper knowledge of student aptitudes and what is taken to be the proper production of knowledge itself. After Sigmund Freud,[11] we might term practices of knowledge exposure a specific form of *epistemophilia*.[12] They express

11. Freudian techniques are available for considering both sides of the coin: the impulse informing the desire to expose, and the secret, unconscious desire to be exposed. For Freud, "the infant's desire to look is 'an instinctual erotic activity' focused on the genitals and particularly on the mother's penis. … The search for this imaginary object 'leaves indelible traces on the mental life of the child, who has pursued that portion of his infantile sexual researches with particular thoroughness'" (Freud cited in Brooks 2001: 121). Proceeding from this point, debunking practices might be considered the eroticized pursuit of an imaginary object, a line of thinking that is taken up by Slavoj Žižek (2000) in his examination of artworks depicting partially exposed bodies: "The crucial point (or, rather, the underlying illusion) of traditional painting is that the 'true' incestuous naked body is none the less waiting there to be discovered—in short, the illusion of traditional realism does not lie in the faithful rendering of the depicted objects; rather, it lies in the belief that *behind* the directly rendered objects *is* the absolute Thing which could be possessed if only we were able to discard the obstacles or prohibitions that prevent access to it" (2000: 7).
12. Brooks (2001: 120) explains: "I believe that we owe that lovely word to James Strachey, who in the *Standard Edition* of Freud's work translates Freud's term *Wisstrieb* as 'epistemophilic instinct.' Like many of Strachey's translations, this takes a compound of two simple Germanic words and passes it through Greek to arrive

a kind of desire whose immediate cause might be to expose a particular object of knowledge, but which is liable to be waylaid by the very means and processes of unveiling: desire coming to lie instead "in the way, rather than simply in the endpoint" (Brooks 1993: 9). Following from this, modern theorists of narrative have "undermined the importance of the *content* of exposure in favour of the visual or verbal foreplay which precedes its exposure" (Banks and Harris 2004: 12). This sexualized understanding of exposure—which might draw also on Roland Barthes's (1973) discussion of the unveiling of the striptease artist's body as akin to the exposure of narrative mysteries—apparently turns Latour's analysis on its head. The point is not that fetishes are unveiled but that unveiling itself is a fetish.

The other side of the coin—the unconscious desire to be exposed—is not our main focus here, but briefly, the idea follows from Freud's (1930) understanding of guilt, and how it is not so much that underhand (duplicitous, false, counterfeit, criminal) behavior produces guilt but that guilt produces such behavior. It is only a minor extension of this argument to suggest that the faker fakes out of his or her unconscious desire for exposure; the felt sense of *deserving to be debunked* stimulating the conduct of practices ripe for debunking.

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at English. 'Drive for knowledge' would have been a simpler solution. But 'epistemophilia' strikes me as a felicitous complication, since it preserves the erotic sense in which Freud conceives *Wisstrieb*, and because it points us not just to knowledge, but to the roots of knowing."

3. Exposé as connoisseurship, nationalism, entertainment

The overlapping themes of exposé as entertainment, connoisseurship, and nationalism are particularly salient in reference to counterfeit goods.

"Fake watch busta" is an Instagram and Tumblr phenomenon in which exposé functions as both entertainment and a sign of the debunker's connoisseurship, with the ability to discern the counterfeit watch a marker of distinction in Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) sense.[13] If the internet can seem like a colossal acephalous fakescape, it is also, and equally, a technology of exposé of the fakes it features and gives rise to.[14] The linked "Fake watch busta" websites typically feature hip hop artists' publicity shots, accompanied by judgments—stamped in bold capitals upon the shots themselves—concerning the authenticity of the branded watches worn in them ("FAKE!" "GENUINE!"). "Below the line" user comments signal mirth, intrigue, consternation, and disputation, depending on subject position. The tone of the sites mixes irony and insight: the judgments reveal not only fake watches but reflect back to us our own obsession with authenticity. For all that, the websites still enact a haughty "take down" of imitative aspirations; of these artists' attempts to "fake it till they make it." (*The Invention of Tradition*, it should be evident, is the "Fake watch busta" of scholarship.) This kind of exposé emphatically is the most literal instance of a practice of distinction, as defined by

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13. See https://www.instagram.com/fakewatchbusta/?hl=en; https://gearpatrol.com/2016/03/15/how-to-spot-counterfeit-watch-fakewatchbusta/
14. See Mazzarella (2006: 473) on depictions of the internet as "a corruption-exposing X-ray machine."

Bourdieu, that may be found. Consumption, he points out, is "a stage in a process of communication, that is, an act of deciphering, decoding, which presupposes practical or explicit mastery of a cipher or code." The exposer of counterfeit goods demonstrates just such a mastery of code. Bourdieu also lays emphasis on "the capacity to see (*voir*)" as a function of the knowledge of those with the capacity to discern (1984: xxv). Instagram and equivalent websites literally and vividly underscore the frequently central role of techniques of vision in practices of exposé.

In certain national contexts, to be able to discern the genuine article is to be an adequate national citizen; the work of exposé the work of nation building: a nationalist brand of distinction. This is one of the key points of Newell's (2013) work, already mentioned, on *bluffeurs* in Côte d'Ivoire: to be able to distinguish "real" from "fake" goods is to be a proper modern citizen, as distinct from "outsiders" (immigrants) from neighboring countries, whose inability to discern "real" from "counterfeit" goods is all too revealing of their "fake" citizenship, too. Questions of citizenship and the nation are also raised in Susanne Brandtstädter's (2009) work on China, a country whose synonymity with the production of counterfeit goods has directly stimulated the birth of consumer movements there demanding quality products. A straightforward equation is set up between the nation's development and the quality and genuineness of the goods it manufactures, with detecting and exposing fakes coming to be framed as patriotic acts with the power to eliminate the "national shame" of knockoff goods; signs of advanced citizenship (*qianjing*) (2009: 142).

Also instructive here is the case of the discovery and exposé of a "fake" Apple Store in China in 2011, as discussed in the work of Fan Yang (2014). The episode,

which underscored the synonymy between China and fakery in the public imagination, pertinently helps to disclose the meaning of the work of exposé of counterfeit goods in twenty-first-century global capitalism, steering us to the question: Just who is this work for? It was an American expat travelling in small-town China who came across the store, which looked exactly like a conventional Apple Store, with the same distinctive gleaming layout, genuine Apple products available for purchase, and staff who thought that they were indeed employees of a genuine Apple Store. Curious about the presence of such a prestigious store in nondescript provincial China (Kunming), the American did some internet research. The store, indeed, was not genuine. Duly exposed as such in her blog, the story was picked up by international news outlets such as the BBC and circulated globally. The store was closed. As Yang (2014: 86) notes, the role of a "regular" expat citizen (and the many Apple online forum users who mocked it and news outlets who circulated news of it) in debunking the store and enforcing the global intellectual property rights (IPR) regime is striking: "While these Apple users and observers have no official affiliation with the company, they have willingly turned themselves into an army of 'fake detectives' ... [acting] as volunteers on behalf of the globalizing IPR regime to regulate and govern difference by way of 'authenticating sameness.'" Moreover, the teasing and contemptuous language of the online forum users demonstrates their enjoyment of such detective work. Similarly, user-uploaded video compilations on YouTube—apparently made by tourists—depict obviously fake storefronts in China. "Below the line" comments gleefully mock the unsophisticated rip-offs and reinforce stereotypes of China's pathological, and at the same time amusingly crude, production of fakes; exposé as a kind

of meme or enjoyable pastime. Yet, once more, such work could have been done on behalf of Starbucks and McDonald's. To return to "Fake watch busta": though shot through with irony and knowingness, its contributors are nonetheless fake detectives exposing either the failure of another's "fronting" or, where the wearer being exposed mistakenly thinks the watch is genuine, the inability of others to make the distinctions that matter. While there may, on the one hand, presently be "a creeping assumption … that there are things more important than truth" (Campbell 2002: 12), it can also seem—at least in the arena of counterfeit goods (and stores)—that such is our continued deep investment in the real, we are willing to do the policing of the (true) brand ourselves, and enjoy it, too. The internet—as much as it gives rise to fakes—also constitutes a kind of crowdsourced classification technology to *sort the things out* that it otherwise mixes together[15]—from pollution to purity, matter no longer out of place, and critique firmly in the service of capitalism (cf. Boltanski and Chiapello 2005).

4. Exposé's risk of failure

Discussing magic, Stanley Tambiah borrows the phrase "falsification riddle" from Karl Popper: "If indeed magical acts are decisively falsified," asks Tambiah, "why do they continue to be enacted?" (1990: 46). If we take exposé to be a form of falsification—falsification by way of revelation—then the question concerning our own "exposé riddle" becomes: If fakes are frequently decisively falsified, why do they continue to be enacted, indeed, to proliferate? While the answer,

15. The reference here is to Bowker and Starr's *Sorting Things Out* (1999).

rather obviously, is because exposé frequently is not effective in the manner intended, the ways in which it can fail are interestingly diverse.

The subjects of exposé may seek to expose exposers in cycles of negative reciprocity, with the dubiousness of methods employed for exposé having the potential to undermine exposé's effects. In the United Kingdom, the "fake sheikh"—a sham Arab businessman employed by *The News of the World* (now defunct) to secretly record films exposing various misdemeanors on the part of the great and the good—is currently serving time for perverting the course of justice.[16] Deception to expose deception may result in empty exposé.

It is a straightforward but still important point that "enlightening critiques are often unsuccessful, indicating the limits of 'unmasking' illusions and revealing reality, perhaps as a deployment of discourse which fails to grasp the meaning of rituals or behaviour denounced" (Boland and Clogher 2017: 127).[17] Logics of exposé can seem to misunderstand the nature of commitment. On the one hand, "preferring palatable illusions to hard truths relates to false prophets who predict a bright and easy future for the chosen people, requiring no ethical transformation—'saying, "Peace, peace" when there is no peace' (Jeremiah 5:14)" (Boland and Clogher 2017: 127). On the other, it may simply be the case that it was never in the first place the honesty/reality/non fakery of the target of debunking that was important to supporters; debunking

16. Undercover reporter Mazher Mahmood, who often posed as a sheikh, has been accused of multiple cases of entrapment. In 2016 he was sentenced to 15 months in prison.
17. A charge frequently leveled at Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion*, for example.

fakes in such instances will likely have little effect other than, in some cases, reasserting the commitment of supporters to the target, now taken as the victim of a "witch-hunt." Mazzarella (2006: 473) has asked: "Is it possible to cause a sensation by revealing something that everybody already knows?" Fact-checkers may tirelessly debunk a political candidate's false claims, but if their support is not contingent on their telling of the truth, and everyone in any case knows many of their claims are lies, then debunking, again, will carry little heft.

While these points recall well-publicized efforts to debunk "fake news," we can also think here of the debunking of "false" gurus in India. Given the historical significance in Indian devotionalism of enduring tests of faith, hidden camera unveilings of an officially celibate guru having sexual intercourse—for instance—may be taken by devotees as occasions to both prove and intensify their devotional commitment—preordained tests of their true loyalties.[18] Relatedly, there is also the recognition that "really real" gurus may be faking their fakeness (Khandelwal 2004: 173)—another reason not to be too dismissive of even those who appear most obviously fake, and potentially to distrust actions of exposé rather than to hail them for creating conditions of trust.

Exposé suffers from a further self-defeating propensity, which lies in what we can call *the problem of the synecdoche*. The debunker—especially one acting in the domain of supposedly false beliefs and magical practices—tends to act according to the understanding that others, like they do, will take a part to be in some way representative of the whole; viz. if one

18. See Copeman and Ikegame (2012) for fuller discussion.

miracle-performing holy man is successfully exposed as fraudulent, then those witness to the debunking will be less credulous of miracles *as a whole*. But that, of course, is not necessarily the case. Specific hail charms and curers can be branded fraudulent, but such scrutiny might well "leave the main belief in the prophetic and therapeutic powers of witch-doctors unimpaired" (Evans-Pritchard [1937] 1976: 107; see Lévi-Strauss 1963).[19] In other words, rather than the part standing for the whole, the part is quite easily *detached from* the whole: the audience may not take a synecdochal view at all. While the specter of the fraudulent spiritual leader may breed anxiety about the origins of (spiritual) value, "fakery appears as the margin, the horizon against which a moral centre is clarified" (Shipley 2009: 524), which is to say that the very work of exposé that successfully designates someone a fake witch-doctor or guru can seem to rest on the assumption (and reconfirm as fact) that real or true witch-doctors or gurus do exist; debunkers' very success may be their failure.

"Only when there is a possible Lying Worm," says Lewis Hyde, "can we begin to speak of a True Worm" (1998: 60). A parallel is found in Martin Heidegger's work on truth, in which he draws on the Greek *alethia*, with its connotations of unveiling and unconcealedness, to construe truth as that which has been unconcealed (Heidegger 1993). Thus, for Heidegger, "truth as unveiling necessarily also involves non-truth, since concealment is the mode by which unconcealment appears.[20] In this 'truth-event' (*Wahrheitsgeschehen*)

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19. See Copeman and Hagström (2018) for more on these matters.

20. See also Constantine Nakassis's (2013) argument that authentic branded goods do not simply create the

… truth itself—the truth of Being—is 'unconcealed'" (Banks and Harris 2004: 10). No truth without fakes. If ever the work of exposé were to be completed, and every fake revealed as such, not only the Lying Worm, but also the True Worm, would vanish into thin air.

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conditions for a division between real and fake but are themselves an effect of it. In this line of thinking, the fake is more than a mere derivative of the putative genuine article.

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CHAPTER 6

Fake, unreal, and absurd

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The term fake in reference to news and representations of facts has come to dominate much of political and media discourse in the United States today. Surely, it would be too facile to interpret this focus on fake as simply an attempt to guard the straightforward boundary between fake representations and true representations, between fake language that misrepresents reality and true language that represents it accurately. It is commonplace that every media channel and political statement represents facts in a particular way and interprets them through particular ideological assumptions. However, there is something different and new in the current focus on fake, something that goes beyond what the familiar critiques of representations and presuppositions seem to capture. To make sense of this new interest in fake today it is helpful to pay attention to the lexicon that is used to critically discuss

it. Reminding us that the whole world today is still "post-Soviet" and "post-Cold War," Susan Buck-Morss remarked that in these conditions progressive political analysis must not only critically analyze the global economic and political conditions, it must simultaneously subject to scrutiny the terms in which it performs this analysis (Buck-Morss 2006).

Broadly, the language that dominates the US media and public discourse is that of liberalism. Like with any language, the terms in which it conducts political analysis clarify some aspects of political reality and obscure others. A familiar example of this effect is the opposition of "democracy" and "authoritarianism," which has occupied a dominant status in much of the US media and political discourse since the Cold War. While the description that this opposition provides is not without merit, it also contributes to unfairly decoupling "democracy" from "capitalism" and to making the latter less visible, therefore to concealing much of the real geopolitical context.

Another example of the distorting effect that the language of liberalism performs is the use of the terms "Global North" and "Global South" that today occupies a prominent position in the media and in academia. During the Cold War the world was routinely spoken of in terms of a tripartite division—the First World, the Second World, and the Third World. In practice, the phrases "the First World" (industrialized, capitalist countries) and "the Second World" (pro-Soviet countries of state socialism) were rarely used, but "the Third World" was a popular term that designated the developing and postcolonial countries. In fact, when the term "the Third World" (*le tiers monde*) was coined in 1952 by French demographer Alfred Sauvy, it was designed not to divide the world into three camps but to suggest a parallel with "the third estate" (*le tiers*

état)—a term from the French Revolution that referred to a social strata that did not belong to the nobility and the clergy and therefore could potentially rise against the world marked by the highly uneven distribution of wealth (Sauvy 1952). Sauvy's "third world," by analogy, referred to the poorer countries and colonies as a global third estate. This term was not about hierarchy but about social position. But when this term was appropriated by the Cold War discourses of development—both capitalist and state-socialist—it acquired the meaning of a hierarchy between three camps (as less and more "developed") that was further inflected through the Cold War opposition and skewed the representation of the world accordingly.

With the collapse of state socialism in 1989–91, this triple picture was replaced with the binary of the "Global North" and "Global South." While this substitution is often described as a progressive attempt to de-emphasize the hierarchical relation between the industrialized "West" and developing world, in practice it also contributes to reproducing multiple liberal distortions. The language of "Global North" and "Global South" relegates the history of world socialism to an inconsequential aberration in the history of liberal capitalism. For example, it leaves no space for many former "Second World" countries of state socialism, especially those that are not integrated today into the liberal institutions of global capitalism, such as the EU, NATO, etc. Russia does not fit into either the Global North or Global South; its past and present are rendered invisible by this terminology. This binary language also obscures the real differences between the countries that are placed in the category of "the South" today, many of which used to be affiliated with either the US capitalist or Soviet socialist models. However, the real difference between them is important for understanding their

current encounters with global capitalism. The "developing countries" that were variously involved with the socialist model included not only countries with communist governments (e.g., Mongolia, Vietnam, Cuba) but also countries that in different periods pursued "noncapitalist paths of development" and received Soviet scientific, educational, economic, or military aid (Angola, Ethiopia, Mozambique, India, Chile, Algeria, South Yemen, Laos, Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, and many others). Relegating them to the space of the Global South along with many other countries is to erase the economic and political history of global socialism that affected their development and made them different.

Another example of the distortion performed by liberal language is its current reframing of the political world in the United States in terms of "patriots" and "traitors" or "foreign agents." Donald Trump's unexpected win in the presidential elections is frequently discussed in this language not as a reflection or symptom of actual social changes that have taken place inside the United States but as a manifestation of malicious interference from outside. While it is clear that some sort of interference did take place, at the moment it is far from obvious what aspects of this interference are true and whether and to what extent they have been consequential. But such considerations seem to be of secondary importance today. The discourse on interference seems to be important, at least in part, not for how truthfully it represents reality but for how successfully it renders the unexpected outcome of the elections as illegitimate, not ours, and in need of being reverted. One regrettable result of this discursive shift is that a critical analysis of the domestic political situation in the United States becomes difficult. The binary language of patriots and traitors allows one to avoid confronting the sad result of the long neoliberal

hegemony that disenfranchised millions of people and helped to shape the "unexpected" vote of so many in the elections (see Hochschild 2016; Vance 2016). This language also makes it easier not to take responsibility for the bankrupt policies of the neoliberal establishment and harder to discuss alternatives. If Trump's win is reduced to his collusion with a foreign power, real politics becomes displaced onto the stereotyped figures of foreign agents and true patriots who oppose them.

Liberal discourse also reduces "Russia" to a space that supposedly exists outside of the geopolitical context, a zone that is subjected exclusively to its own internal logic of authoritarianism and corruption and that is populated by an army of computer hackers, internet trolls and KGB/GRU/FSB agents. In the early 2000s, anthropologist Matti Bunzl observed that after the first post-communist decade, Europe had found itself caught "between anti-Semitism and Islamophobia" (Bunzl 2005). Today, Western liberal media rejects "Islamophobia" but increasingly seems to embrace "Russophobia." An article in the *Washington Post* described the conservative and nationalist forces in Europe that are allied with Trump as "a motley cast of Euroskeptics, Islamophobes, Russophiles, and neo-Nazis" (Tharoor 2017). Russophiles—people interested in Russian history, culture, and language—are grouped here with neo-Nazis. The article, remarkably, denounces "Islamophobia" and "Russophilia" in one breath.

Curiously, this displacement of political analysis onto the language of patriots versus traitors and foreign agents, mirrors precisely the tactic used by the Putin government in Russia. Tellingly, Russian liberal media that often opposes the government also contributes to this binary picture of the world. Both pro-Putin nationalists and anti-Putin liberals claim that Russia is divided into two camps that they often call "two

Russias," except their interpretation of these two Russias is reversed (Matveev 2014). In the language of state media, the two Russias are represented by "patriots" and "foreign agents"; patriots, it is claimed, are the majority of Russians who care about their country and support the state and the government, while traitors are a small group of overprivileged pro-Western urban liberals whose opposition to the government is funded through foreign (i.e., "Western") grants and salaries. Putin's government requires that all recipients of foreign grants in Russia (including cultural, educational, social, and medical organizations) should be registered as "foreign agents" and banned from the political process.

To reproduce this binary model, Russian federal TV channels, with an audience of a hundred million, in their news programs and political talk shows mix real facts with fake facts. The main effect of this practice is not necessarily that the audiences are fooled into believing every imaginary story and fact, but rather that they learn that "facts" may be read not for how true or false they are, but for how effective or ineffective, patriotic or unpatriotic, pro-Russian or pro-Western they are. This model teaches the audience to read political discourse at the level of its performative dimension (how successfully it represents) rather than its constative dimension (how truthfully it represents) (Aliukov 2017). In this approach, even if one considers some facts to be true, one may still believe that it is more important (e.g., for considerations of security, sovereignty, patriotism, loyalty, etc.) to conceal or misrepresent them. This public approach to "truth" is also routinely encountered in the United States today, for example, in a widespread opinion that Wikileaks should not be allowed to publish facts, which is a shift from a culture that celebrated whistleblowers (see "WikiLeaks'

piracy" 2017). This situation is also comparable to the political discourse of the party and state media during the late Soviet period, when the dominant political rhetoric experienced a "performative shift" (Yurchak 2006), whereby the form of political language became fixed and highly predictable, and repeating this form from one context to the next was usually more important than attending to the referential meanings associated with it.

Recently, the techniques and practices of the performative shift have been revived, and with the introduction of online social media they have dramatically expanded. One example is online trolling conducted by companies that seem to have some links to the Russian government, although these links are indirect and not always easy to prove. The job of online trolls is to insert fake personal opinions, fake eyewitness accounts, and fake rumors into real online discussions. One such company is located in Saint Petersburg and hides its true occupation under the name "Internet Research Limited." Russian users of social media who are well aware of this situation ironically call employees of this company "trolls" and the company itself, "Troll Factory" (Yurchak 2016).

Employees of the Troll Factory receive daily assignments of what social media sites and blogs to visit, what topics to comment on, what opinions to voice and what key words to use. Acting like regular online users, they hide their true identity behind multiple fake accounts, registered under fake names, with traffic diverted through remote proxy servers (Chen 2015; Rezunkov 2015; Walker 2015; Yurchak 2016). Importantly, companies such as Troll Factory are not actually partisan news agencies, like Russia 24 or Fox News. The main purpose of these trolls' activities is *not* to legitimate one party line but rather to erase

the boundary between facts and fakes, redirecting the online discussions of different representations of the world from how true or untrue they are to how effective or ineffective they are and what interests they allegedly serve. Again, in this case the performative dimension of political discourse (how successfully it represents) is emphasized at the expense of its constative dimension (how truthfully it represents).

For example, among many comments that the employees of the Troll Factory posted on the Russian and Ukrainian social media sites concerning the confrontation in Eastern Ukraine, some were in support of the separatists and against the Ukrainian military operation in the East, others voiced the opposite position, and the third sounded confused, lamenting that it was impossible to find out the real situation. The effect of this multiplicity of postings was to defocus the online discussions and to make it harder to figure out real facts. The trolls also posted similar comments and discussions in the US social media before the presidential elections. Some comments, for example, made claims against Hillary Clinton, others contained antiestablishment rhetoric, and the third advocated progressive causes (e.g., sharing the social grievances of the US war veterans or championing the "Black Lives Matter" movement) (Rusiaeva and Yurchak 2016; Zakharov 2017). Again, the goal of these multiple postings was not to advocate one political position, but to make all political positions appear confusing, suspicious, serving various interests rather than representing facts. The performative dimension of political discourse was again emphasized at the expense of its constative dimension.

In the Russian context, the state and its media are not alone in the work of misrepresenting Russia as the country divided into us and them, into "two Russias."

The language that is used by the liberal opposition also draws this portrait of "two Russias," except this picture is reversed. The majority of Russians are described in this language as a passive, conformist, and apolitical mass that has been brainwashed by progovernment media. On the contrary, representatives of the liberal opposition describe themselves as an active Westernized minority that values liberal democracy and embraces capitalism. This ideology is perpetuated by many groups of the urban liberal intelligentsia—journalists, cultural producers, entrepreneurs, and white-collar workers. Stressing the supposed cultural differences between these two Russias, liberal discourse presents them as insurmountable. In the words of liberal journalist Valerii Pniushkin, there is a paradigmatic difference between the lovers of *pel'meni* (dumplings, traditional Russian peasant food) and the lovers of oysters (refined Western import) (Matveev 2014; Yurchak 2017). *Pel'meni* represent the Russian masses' inability to change and their supposed love for paternalistic authoritarianism. Oysters are the sign of a cosmopolitan outlook, market democracy, and liberal values. Many derogatory terms are used in this media to refer to the "brainwashed" majority ("86 percent" and "cotton wads" [*vata*] are among the most innocent).

This liberal discourse completely ignores the geopolitical context of global capitalism and US hegemony, treating the authoritarian politics of the Russian state as an isolated, ahistorical, local phenomenon that is reduced either to the Russian people's alleged love for despotic authoritarian figures or to their "imperial nostalgia" or to a nationwide indoctrination. It also ignores the actual political struggles in Russia; you will rarely read in the liberal media about labor strikes and opposition marches around the country, and when these protests are mentioned, they are explained

as symptoms of a naïve proto-communist aversion to individual freedoms and the private market or as movements that are reinterpreted in pro-Western liberal terms. In 2011 and 2012, the country was overrun by mass protests against rigged elections. Hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets. Most participants in these protests were regular people from provincial cities and towns. In 2015 and once again in 2017, truckers all over Russia blocked long-distance highways in protest against the newly introduced draconian tax laws that stifled small businesses. Workers in the provincial town of Kaluga protested against the administration of "Benteler Automotive" factory that refused to recognize their membership in the Trans-Regional Trade Union of Autoworkers (Matveev 2014). In June 2017, high school kids in the provincial town of Bryansk protested against corruption in the government and the local school administration. These protests are directed as much against authoritarian state power as against corporate capitalism and neoliberal privatization. However, by substituting a critical analysis of this political situation with the imaginary figure of "two Russias," local liberalism becomes complicit with the pro-Putin nationalism that it is presumed to oppose. The discourse on two Russias belongs to the family of fake representations. To be sure, much of Western liberal media's coverage of Russia, with its reduction of the world to the binary of democracy versus authoritarianism, enthusiastically contributes to this effect (Yurchak 2017).

A progressive critique of the real political conditions in the country must oppose the fake discourse of "two Russias" and contest both the liberal and nationalist ideologies. It must also oppose the analyses of the Russian political context that reduces it to a localized authoritarian history and instead insist on considering

Russian political developments in relation to the geopolitical context. To subject to scrutiny the terms in which much of the analysis is performed, a progressive critique must develop a different critical language—one that transcends binary models and their depoliticizing vocabulary and speaks from a position external to them.

A new political movement that emerged in Russia in the past few years under the name of "monstration" has started experimenting with this kind of political language. *Monstrations* are parades in which thousands of young people walk through city centers carrying slogans that at first appear absurd and incomprehensible. State-controlled media calls these rallies senseless carnivals and meaningless fun. At the same time, state officials suspect them of having a hidden political message and assemble great numbers of riot police to monitor them. This contradictory treatment of monstrations—dismissing them as meaningless and yet treating them as politically subversive—reflects the unique nature of their political discourse. This discourse is spoken from outside of the dominant binary model and it plays with "fake" discourse to articulate its opposition to this model. The semiotics of Charles Peirce and his discussion of the sign is helpful to elucidate this approach.

Monstrations formulate their critical message at the level of what Peirce called indexical and iconic reference, leaving symbolic reference for the absurd. These parades happen on May 1, the date that is universally recognized in Russia for its long political history. They look political when considered as a whole, with thousands of people walking in a column and carrying posters. But each slogan independently makes statements and assertions that appear to be fake—they either state facts that are clearly untrue, or make appeals

based on false premises, or assert something that is so obvious that it requires no assertion. For example, "Racoons are people too," "Roosters are not human," "I am your sugar packet," "Down with chicken-drivers," "Deer cannot even think," etc.

This discourse of fake statements and assertions creates an ironic imitation of the dominant model of the political and media discourse of the state that mixes facts with fakes. Some slogans refer to this mixing more directly: "Let's turn English into Japanese!," "I demand comprehensible slogans," and "LSD-television." Other posters invoke well-known slogans of the political opposition through iconic reference. For example, "We commit heterosexuality" and "We support same-sex fights." In Russian the plural form of "fight" (*draki*) rhymes with the plural form of "marriage" (*braki*). Both slogans indirectly oppose the recent law "against propaganda of homosexuality." On the poster "Russia without Agutin!," the name of a famous and banal pop-singer Agutin is used to invoke the name Putin also through iconic reference, linking it with the well-known slogan of the opposition, "Russia without Putin!"

At the front of monstration parades there is always a banner that states their theme. In Spring 2014, Russian special forces cynically and semiclandestinely enforced a referendum on the Crimean peninsula when it was declared as part of Russia and no longer of Ukraine "by popular demand." At that time a new patriotic slogan, "Crimea is ours!" came to dominate Russian progovernment media channels, progovernment rallies, billboards, and T-shirts (Yurchak 2014a). The political rhetoric of the liberal opposition in Russia, conversely, stressed that Crimea was illegally annexed and would not be recognized as Russian by the international community. The dominant picture of

the political world was divided more than ever into Russian patriots and Russophobe traitors, or, alternatively, into a conformist pro-Putin majority and Westernized enlightened minority. The monstrations responded to these events with a different message. On May 1, 2014, the country's main monstration, in the city of Novosibirsk, walked behind the banner, "Hell is ours"—an ironically negative reference to the "Crimea is ours" slogan. Banners in other cities read: "Forward to the dark past!," "Let imbecility rule!," and "Hurrah! The standard of madness has overcome the standard of living."

By referring to the accounts of the Crimean annexation as "Hell is ours" and "Forward to the dark past," monstrations registered their opposition to both the annexation performed by Putin's authoritarian state, and the refusal of the liberal discourse, both Russian and international, to acknowledge a larger global context within which this controversial act was carried out, including the rise of the far right and nationalistic movements in Ukraine that attempted to hijack Maidan's democratic revolution (Yurchak 2014b; Ishchenko 2016) and the pushy expansion of NATO armies into the former communist spaces under the banner of "democratization." These events have been real and have contributed greatly to legitimate Putin's illiberal, authoritarian politics inside Russia. Both pro-Putin nationalistic rhetoric and anti-Putin liberal discourse are complicit in misrepresenting these political and geopolitical contexts. It is a critical distance from either side of this political dichotomy that makes the discourse of monstrations so unique and able to unite diverse groups of people. The rise of the seemingly "absurd" political language of monstrations is symptomatic of a crisis of representation that reduces the political complexity in and around Russia to the

binary division between patriots and traitors, or liberals and brainwashed masses, or authoritarianism and democracy, effectively depoliticizing political reality and obscuring political analysis.

Today we are witnessing a similar crisis of the liberal model of the media and public discourse in the United States. This discourse also tends to reduce American society to a simplified model of conservatives versus liberals; or of the supposedly white, sexist, fascist bigots of the red states versus the enlightened, ethical, cosmopolitan liberals of coastal cities. Recently it has divided the country further—into the newly elected traitors that are manipulated from across the ocean by the sinister FSB (formerly KGB), and patriots, whose liberal values would be in jeopardy if not protected by the defiant FBI. This picture does much to obscure the complex political reality, making it difficult to analyze the political reasons—local and global—that led to the current situation.

The popular appeal of Donald Trump—and before him Sarah Palin, Herman Cain, and others with a penchant for contradictory, uninformed, parodic speech—does not necessarily mean that their ideas enjoy popular support. But it is a symptom of a growing popular discontent with this binary picture. These figures—Trump in particular, because he could not be easily coopted into the Republican Party discourse—have been perceived by many as speaking from outside of this dominant model. Trump's political rhetoric—with its lack of knowledge, racist assumptions, and unethical propositions—made his voice appear external to this model, which contributed to his popular appeal.

In the United States, a famous attempt to provide an external critique of the dominant model of political and media discourse was performed by Jon Stewart on the *Daily Show*. Stewart's critical voice, at least on

many occasions, was directed at both Republicans and Democrats, Fox News and CNN (Boyer and Yurchak 2010). Bill Maher famously attacked Stewart for being equally harsh on both conservatives and liberals as if they were "equally guilty" of bigotry and racism (Maher 2010). Stewart responded by saying that he did not find it relevant to claim which side in this binary political divide was "more guilty" because it is the model itself that is flawed—the model, in which partisan emphasis on the either-or division substitutes for an open analysis of a true multiplicity of positions and power relations, which is a fundamental precondition for democracy. It was the unique external position of Stewart's voice—his refusal to take sides in the binary model and to reduce his public commentary to one side of the divide—that accounted for his unprecedented popularity.

Trump, of course, is no Stewart. Their speech, clarity, and ethical values cannot be further apart. My point is different. Trump's popular appeal among some layers of American society might have come from his perceived location "outside" of the binary divide, external to the dominant model of the political. When the only way to formulate political opposition to partisan misrepresentations is to speak in a language that is external to the dominant binary model, parodic, politically incorrect, or uninformed discourse may appear to many as a viable solution. This is perhaps why Trump's bombastic and bigoted rhetoric sounded like a fresh political alternative to so many Americans at the last presidential election. And this is one reason why references to "fake" have become so ubiquitous. In the wake of Trump's unexpected win, this term has exposed something about the political world that had remained largely undiscussed previously. Used today by different parties in different, even opposing ways, this

term refers not just to one or the other position but to the dominant model of analysis that reduces the complex political terrain of power relations in the world to binary pictures of patriots versus traitors, enlightened liberals versus brainwashed masses, democracy versus authoritarianism.

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CHAPTER 7

"True self" fantasies

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INTRODUCTION: THE "TRUE SELF" AS A FORM OF RELIGIOUS PERSUASION

Fakery, that is, forms of presentation that are deemed illegitimate or inauthentic, can be about objects (ming vases, breasts); events (fake news, inauthentic festivals); activities (e.g., Graeber's concept of "bullshit jobs"); or about particular aspects of personal identity (your singing voice or your accent, age, gender, "race," PhDs). Here, I explore personal authenticity, considering what tends to be entailed or implied when people talk of the whole of a self as either "real" or "fake," and how this relates to the idea of happiness in the sense of a whole life going well.

You will, no doubt, have come across plenty of examples of "true self" ideology—rhetorical claims that each individual has a unique character and destiny that is partly or wholly concealed during social interaction,

and that is sufficiently mysterious and elusive that as individuals we have first to "discover" our true self in order to "self-actualize," to "become who we really are." You have probably been urged to "be yourself," and felt a little perplexed by this, given the multiple identity options available to you. The relevance of true self ideology to the anthropology of fakery goes in two quite different directions:

- True self ideology seems primarily to be about avoiding fakery: it discourages the use of deception in social encounters, particularly focusing on fake identities.
- Ironically, however, true self ideology is itself dangerously antisocial fake knowledge: true-selfers pretend that each individual has a unique and coherent soul and a destiny, and may even urge people to "actualize" or "fulfill" that destiny, and in so doing to be guided not by other people but by their own "inner voice" or "self-determination."

Any serious social researcher ought therefore to be deeply suspicious of the rampant individualism and narcissism of true self ideology. It is one thing to scratch away at troublesome and unnecessary forms of personal inauthenticity, but it is quite another to send people off on a hopeless and narcissistic quest to find their unique "true self." The quest for the true self is the theme of thousands of self-help texts precisely because it is so perplexing. And the reason it is perplexing should be obvious enough: there is no single "true self" for us to discover, no predestined life for us to "fulfill" through "self-actualization." True self claims, in fact, are deceptive ideologies denying the emergent, interactive, and interdependent nature of the human

self. In this regard, they have much in common with the denial of death.

Along with ancient Buddhist philosophers, the Enlightenment philosopher David Hume, and more recently psychologists such as Roy Baumeister (1995) and Bruce Hood (2012), I take it as axiomatic that the human self is an illusion, a complex ongoing fiction. If you see with two eyes, one important part of that fiction, for example, is the illusion of a unified field of vision that the brain conveniently fabricates so that we don't constantly worry about which eye to believe, or get distracted by the ever-present gap in the middle of that apparently continuous field. And this intriguing puzzle is just a tiny fraction of the lifelong project of self-belief. Buddhist philosophers, in promoting the doctrine of "nonself" (albeit often with annoying inconsistencies), have been unique in the degree to which they have argued for explicit self-skepticism and self-detachment (Harvey 1995; Ricard and Singer 2017). In the West, there are also signs of a growing backlash literature against authenticity addiction (Feldman 2014; York 2015; Lane and Mathes 2018).

Most modern psychological self-philosophies have gone the other way, fabricating false certainties about various forms of essentialized self. A striking example is the book *Authentic: How To Be Yourself and Why It Matters*, by psychotherapeutic researcher and positive psychology practitioner Stephen Joseph (2016). The cover shows fingerprints, symbolizing both personal uniqueness and the idea of the self as something essential and unchanging. The book is full of excellent advice about how not to be fake, but it is fundamentally misleading in its repeated claims that people have a single true self. Here, I want to

invite further exploration of how and why so many contemporary professional psychologists go to extreme lengths not only to purvey pseudo-knowledge about the self but also to dress this up with an aura of empirical, scientific validation. I will argue that this is a form of contemporary religious mystification that we will understand better if we expose it to skeptical and rational enquiry, recognizing it as part of psychology's long and troubled relationship with religion.

Intelligent people understand that essentialist "folk" concepts of the true, autonomous, presocial, good inner self are empirically invalid even if they can sometimes be psychologically beneficial (Schütz and Baumeister 2017). It has also been argued that thinking about everyone as having a concealed inner true self promotes more considerate interethnic interactions (Phillips et al. 2017; De Freitas and Cikara 2018). If someone urges you to "be yourself" or to play music "with soul," you don't necessarily need to accuse them of religious fraudulence, any more than you would if they used terms with religious origins like "inspiration" or "enthusiasm." But if academics and professionals base their studies, their theories, and their life advice on illusions about essential spiritual selves in ways that appear to go beyond casual figurative language, we may need to fight back. True-selfers pretend to know something they don't know and can't know: that "deep within" individuals there is an "inner" self that is better, and more "real" than the more superficial identities, roles, personalities, or character traits. What pretends to be positive insight is in reality nothing more than negative advice: "be yourself" really only means "don't be fake." What pretends to be about the "truth" or "authentication" is really about evaluative approval.

SELF-DECEPTION AND EXISTENTIAL WORRIES

The self-illusion need not involve fakery, and conversely fakery need not involve deception. You can wear make-up or indulge in plastic surgery without fooling yourself or anyone else. There is a fine line and a slippery slope between play (trying out different roles), make-believe (pushing play toward fantasy), and deceptive persuasion. So it is with "true self" beliefs. While many early psychological self theorists write as if they really believed—and really wanted other people to believe—in an essential true self (Horney 1950; Rogers 1961; Miller [1979] 1990), others have left things more ambiguous and emphasized rather the possible psychological benefits of acting *as if* we had an essential true self hidden within us (Schlegel, Hicks, and Christy 2016; Schütz and Baumeister 2017). The flip-side of "positive illusions," however, is that they are plagued by the fear of disenchantment—the nagging feeling that our cherished beliefs, including belief in the self, may be false.

One of the most influential anthropology books of the twentieth century, Ernest Becker's *Denial of Death* (1973), is rarely mentioned by anthropologists. It remains, however, very influential in social psychology and the psychology of religion, and has been a foundational text in Terror Management Theory—a creative vein of research investigating private and collective cultural responses to the uniquely human capability (and curse) of self-awareness (Greenberg, Solomon, and Pyszczynski 2015). Becker outlined many ways in which humans respond to realities that most of us would rather deny, such as our mortality and the likelihood that our selves and our biographies are temporary fictions that ultimately have no particular meaning or

significance. Becker's work is opinionated and not well grounded in ethnographic evidence, but it is very useful in highlighting forms of fear-based denialism that are commonly exploited, and in some ways exacerbated, by religious institutions. Nowadays, fantasies about selves and souls are keenly fostered by the global self-help movement and by various psychological professions. Fear of death, and associated fears of existential incoherence or insignificance, seem to be at the core of many kinds of psychological and religious fakery.

Another exceptionally influential anthropology text, Erving Goffman's *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), is somewhat better remembered by anthropologists but is still much more commonly cited by sociologists and even more so by psychologists, despite his overt antipathy to personality theory—something Becker was to echo with his claim that "human character is a vital lie," that "man lives by lying to himself about himself" (1973: 52). Goffman's metaphor of life as staged drama, based on ethnographic fieldwork in a Shetland hotel, greatly strengthens our ability to recognize the self as an ongoing interactive project involving multiple forms of "impression management." What Goffman might have done better, from a psychological perspective, would have been to recognize that this interactive process involves efforts to persuade and impress oneself, not just other people. Self-persuasion and self-deception, brilliantly illustrated by M.C. Escher's self-drawing hands, often melt imperceptibly into one another. And the consequent uncertainties of agency and motivation leave philosophers with endless opportunities to argue over whether and in what sense self-deception is even possible.

It is virtually certain that most people in most countries today talk and worry more about their

identity, and about their happiness, than their grandparents did. New comforts and freedoms have produced both "selfie culture" and rampant self-doubt (Storr 2017). As with the fear of death, denial of the uncertainties and of the illusionary nature of the self commonly prompts strenuous self-deception. Plagued by fears of existential meaninglessness, people express pseudo-confidence in an inner core identity, sometimes considered as a "spirit" or "soul" that precedes and survives our this-worldly experiences, and that reveals itself occasionally through tantalizing moments of "spiritual" peak experiences that offer glimpses of what it might feel like to be "at one" with this true self, and even "in harmony" with the cosmos. But instead of allowing people simply to enjoy moments of blissful self-transcendence for the elusive and fascinating experiences that they are, purveyors of the religious concept of "spiritual well-being" seek to persuade people that they can't truly be themselves without imagining these moments as windows on a "deeper" truth that has something to do with their soul or destiny.

A huge global commerce in self-help advice feeds off this volatile combination of self-doubt and fake certainty (McGee 2005). Not only the obviously fraudulent self-help gurus but also professional counsellors and psychologists urge you to find and express your "true self," and to seek "authentic happiness" by "becoming who you are," cultivating "self-determination," and to pursue "fulfillment" as if you had a single preordained destiny to fulfill. When these merchants of individualistic pseudo-certainty sell "true self" ideology, they are also, of course, simultaneously undermining people's ability to live comfortably with ontological self-doubt. Terror Management Theory has taught us that somewhere in their consciousness,

people who say they believe in an afterlife also harbor an endlessly nagging fear of death. Similarly, it seems likely that those who cling to "true self" beliefs are also revealing a deeply unsettling unwillingness to accept that the self is an illusion. Professionals who encourage this kind of fatalism or learned helplessness seem to have a moral duty to question why they do so, and whether it promotes or inhibits well-being.

TRUE SELF IDEOLOGY AS A RELIGIOUS BELIEF

Even by his own standards, Clifford Geertz excelled himself in providing quotable arguments about Western personhood, and about religious belief. I want to link these two in order to explore contemporary religiosity in the "positive psychology" movement in which selves often appear sanctified, and "true selves" commonly linked with the concept of "spiritual well-being." On personhood, Geertz argued that

> the Western conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe … [is] a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world's cultures. (Geertz 1974: 30–31)

On religious make-believe, Geertz claimed that

> the religious perspective differs from the common-sensical… deliberately manufacturing an air of semblance and illusion, it deepens the concern with fact and seeks to create an aura of utter actuality. It is this sense of the "really real" upon which the religious perspective rests. (Geertz 1966: 27–28)

Geertz was right that religion often entails noncasual belief in things that aren't true. Nonetheless, a lot of ambiguity hinges on the "aura of utter actuality" and the "sense of really real," tautologies that hint at tantalizingly unstable combinations of belief and doubt. Skepticism antennae are alerted when people claim that they are getting in touch with their "true selves," or that their experiences are "really spiritual" or their emotions are "deep." Believing in the self is very different from these kinds of flagrantly counterrational religious beliefs, because it is likely that by default people take their own identity for granted in everyday life. Still, self-belief is something that requires self-persuasion, and this can become "religious" insofar as identity claims involve sanctifying a version of the self in order to put it beyond debate, or when autobiographical narratives seek attention or approval by labeling some experiences as "spiritual."

Geertz no doubt exaggerated the uniqueness of Western personhood for polemical effect, but in the United States there is some fairly extreme rhetoric promoting the sanctity of the individual. When combined with the emphasis on originality and authenticity in "true self" discourse, this puts pressure on individuals not only to believe in their own bounded coherence and uniqueness, but to flaunt it. In a fascinating short section on naming practices in the United States, Steven Levitt and Stephen Dubner (2006) note that in California 30 percent of black girls are given a name that is unique among every baby born that year in California. Ironically, trying too hard to be a unique individual can backfire, because there were "228 babies named Unique during the 1990s alone, and 1 each of Uneek, Uneque, and Uneqqee." They don't say whether anyone has called their offspring "Authentic" or "Genuine," but you can see that a theme here is parents

trying to give their children a head start in the pursuit of distinctive individualism, and that this harmonizes with the popular rhetoric about "being yourself" and "becoming who you are."

The important link between personhood and religious belief is that the bounded, unique, and integrated self isn't the kind of entity that we can take for granted. Like gods, fairies, and witches, the self is the kind of elusive entity that is commonly promoted by religious dogma and persuasion, *precisely because it isn't real*. Certainly, individuals exist, but coherent and consistent identities and approved personal biographies are things that need to be worked at. And in the modern era, one way of doing this is to persuade people to believe that they are, in Geertz's terms, "really real"—that there is hidden somewhere a destined, "true" version of themselves that they should try to discover and express.

PSYCHOLOGY, "SPIRIT-SPEAK," AND RELIGIOUS SELF-DECEPTION

On March 20, 2016, at its annual event to remind humanity of the importance of happiness, the United Nations welcomed several speakers to its headquarters to tell humanity about "spiritual" aspects of the pursuit of well-being.[1] There were some serious well-being researchers, but the speakers also included Sonia Emmanuel, a "holistic coach and energy medicine expert," who informed the crowd that happiness promotes hormones that "vibrate at the highest frequency"; Stefano Bizzotto on "holistic energy treatments"; a "spiritual

1. http://www.un.org/webcast/pdfs/160320-happiness.pdf.

healer" known as Crótalo Sésamo (born Alessandro Zattoni) who "teaches astral traveling and out-of-body experiences" and represents the "spiritual community" of Federazione Damanhur; Paul McKenna, a stage hypnotist with a bad reputation for fraudulent health claims, spreading nonsense about paranormal phenomena, and suing people who question the validity of his "PhD in hypnosis"; several representatives of "United Beings," a somewhat obscure organization in Italy that says it specializes in "spiritual research" and promotion of belief in miracles; a "holistic therapist," Patrizia Coppola; and Roberto Cossa, a "Reiki master and entrepreneur in ecological wellness." Remember, these exponents of New Age spiritualism were at an event in the *United Nations headquarters*, attended by ambassadors from around the world and by numerous A-list celebrities and major press agencies. But do the advocates of spiritualism have any coherent or useful thoughts to offer concerning distinctively "spiritual" components of well-being, or pathways to well-being?

Mystical and religious perspectives, let's not forget, have always been major driving forces in the development of modern psychology, despite the best efforts of secularizers like Sigmund Freud (Rank 1950). Through my university I have access to numerous journals with "spiritual" in the title, most of which seem to encourage authors simply to take the concept of spirit for granted. These include, for example, the *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care*, which promotes application of Christian theology to therapeutic and pastoral concerns, always on the assumption that "God" and "spirit" are critical factors in healing; *Spiritual Psychology and Counseling*, which publishes articles based on empirical care and therapy work by people who mainly seem to treat "spiritual" just as a euphemism for "religious"; and the *Journal for Spiritual & Consciousness Studies*, which

publishes shameless nonsense purveying pseudo-science about revelatory dreams, near-death experiences, spiritual travel, and clairvoyance, many of which claim some kind of supporting scientific evidence.

Did you know that in the nineteenth century there was a time when the secular term "mentology" might have prevailed over the more mystical term "psychology" as the label for the scientific study of the mind? That might have happened had there been a critical mass of rationalists brave enough to accept that something as elusive and mysterious as human consciousness could be studied without resorting to deceptive spirit-speak. We might then have had mentosomatic illness, mentiatrists, mentotherapies, and mentodelic drugs. Instead, we are left with a labeling of the mind as "psyche," an ancient Greek term for "soul," with all the attendant quandaries about which kinds of soul beliefs psychologists thought they were adopting. There is no substantial parallel scholarship for "pneumatology," the study of what the Greeks called "spirit," and many psychologists are in practice uninterested in distinctions between mind, soul, and spirit. But some modern mental professionals don't think this superficial mystification of the mind goes far enough. Frequent use of the term "psychospiritual" is indicative of the semi-religious bet-hedging that pervades modern psychology: insofar as "psyche" has been secularized as a synonym for "mind," a new drive toward re-enchantment invokes "spirit" and "soul" as reminders of the mystifying ineffability of the life force.

A Google Scholar search for "true self" in titles shows a steady steep increase to seventy hits for 2017 from fifteen for 1987. Widening the search to include titles that mention related terms, such as "authentic self," "psychological authenticity," "personal authenticity," "self-realization," or "real self," shows a tenfold

increase from 1,500 items in 1987 to 14,600 items in 2017. There was also a tenfold increase over the same period in titles using "spiritual well-being," "spiritual wellness," "self-transcendence," "psychospiritual," "spiritual psychology"; and a twentyfold increase in articles using these terms in the main text. "Spiritual intelligence," "spirituality quotient," and "spiritual health" were rarely used by academics before this century, but have both seen a fourfold increase in titles in the past decade, and are now roughly forty times as common as "religious intelligence." Titles with "authenticity" increased more than tenfold, and titles with "fake" increased fortyfold from 32 to 1,300. These statistics are all only very rough indicators, but they don't just reflect overall increases in numbers of academic publications. They all reflect substantial increases in academic attention devoted to these terms.

As with most religious dogma, we can't fully understand the social functions and effects of "spirit-speak" without recognizing that it does tend to involve deception. Religious faith, worship, and doctrines have done much good in the world but they can't be properly understood without recognizing that they are forms of personal self-deception, collective make-believe, and manipulative deception of other people. We underanalyze the whole concept of the sacred if we fail to observe the close relationships between sanctification and deception: by rendering knowledge sacred, sanctifiers are trying to put it beyond normal rational and moral scrutiny, often for strategic purposes. This applies to claims about "spirituality" as much as to claims about the existence of a "true self."

This is an extremely important point for students of religion to note: far too few texts on religious doctrine have even bothered to highlight the deceptive nature of religious metaphors and myths, and to ask why

deliberate deception is seen as necessary in doctrines purporting to seek and promote truth and goodness. Whether due to careless neglect, or politeness, or fear of reprisal, this omission impoverishes the substance and plausibility of religious studies. There are three things you need to know about the meanings people attach to "spirituality":

- Most writers and speakers make no attempt to define the term or outline in a general sense their purposes in using it.
- When people do discuss definition, they nearly always begin by acknowledging that it is extremely vague and very diverse in its associations.
- Definitions offered are typically as circular as the phrase "it is what it is" and as antidefinitional as "you'll know it when you see it." In a futile effort to clarify something ineffable and ill-understood by reference to something else equally ineffable, they refer to other vague abstractions such as meaning, the sublime, religiosity, holiness, experience of divinity, and transcendence.
  (Gardner 2000; Buzan 2001; Fuller 2001; Solomon 2002; Sheldrake 2007; Comte-Sponville 2008; Heelas 2008; De Botton 2012; Harris 2014)

It would clearly be unfair and unhelpful to object to studying "spirituality" as a "folk psychology" concept. Scholars can legitimately take an empathic and respectful interest in people's beliefs about "spirit" or "spirits" or "spirituality" just as they do with people's beliefs in an afterlife, in deities, in witches, or in astrology or homeopathy. It is also helpful to observe whether there are any systematic connections between such beliefs and some aspects of well-being. What isn't acceptable is to refer to any of these beliefs as "dimensions" of

well-being. Scholars who develop and use measures for "spiritual well-being" and "spiritual intelligence," like those who measure "personal authenticity," are treating the ineffable as if it were effable.

CONCLUSION: FROM "TRUE SELF" TO SELF-TRANSCENDENCE AND SOCIO-CULTURAL AUTHENTICATION

At risk of overgeneralizing about the copious and highly varied anthropological literature on the self, most of this addresses self-conceptualization and associated social performance and role enactment, whereas a relatively minor portion seems to be about the motivations and purposes associated with self-making. In psychological research on selfhood, by contrast, there is a very substantial tradition associating self-concepts with lifelong self-making projects. Among these, two contrasting but closely associated objectives stand out:

- introspective attention toward building a better self from the inside out, and
- extrospective attention toward self-transcendence.

This division reflects two very different associations of "authenticity": *introspective self-verification*, and *socio-cultural authentication.* It also applies to conceptualizations of selves as "spirits" or "souls." Just as theologians and clergy have for thousands of years enjoyed and suffered fierce debates as to whether "God" is "out there" or "inside" us, so too do psycho-spirituality advocates seem to embroil themselves in troubling confusions as to whether the "spirit" or the "true self" is to be sought "inside" us or externally, through "transcendence" or even "self-transcendence."

Abraham Maslow, the godfather of "self-actualization" and one of the most important influences on the contemporary "positive psychology" movement worldwide, seems to have intuited this problem toward the end of his life. If you Google "Maslow pyramid" you will see multiple diagrammatic versions of his famous "hierarchy of needs," nearly all of which put "self-actualization" at the apex of his model of human needs and aspirations. These correctly reflect most of Maslow's writing on the subject of motivation, which was not only highly individualistic but also based on an apparent belief that all humans should try to discern, actualize, and express a single "true" version of themselves.

Later in his career, however, Maslow began favoring a very different concept for the apex of his hierarchy: "self-transcendence," in recognition that peak experiences often arise from detaching from self-concern in various ways, such as through social engagements or communing with nature (Koltko-Rivera 2006). An analogous process is the more recent development of "self-determination theory," a major body of psychological research closely associated with positive psychology. Often highly polemical in contrasting "intrinsic motivation" as good and "extrinsic motivation" as bad, and in positing the mature, autonomous individual as someone who has broken free from restrictive parental and society norms, self-determination theorists nonetheless accept that selves develop and flourish through relationships, and that it can be psychologically healthy to recognize that belief in an essential, eternal self is false (Ryan and Deci 2017: 63). In this regard, they join most social psychologists in accepting that we must complement Western "independent self" rhetoric by learning from non-Western cultures about the value of "interdependent self" concepts (Markus and Kitayama 1991).

As anthropologists we are schooled in the fine art of "making sense," particularly by using charitable relativism and empathy to render strange beliefs and practices more comprehensible and more forgivable. I have tried to show here that if we are to appreciate and derive value from "true self" discourse, we are obliged first to expose its deceptions and try to understand why they happen. It seems likely that the appetite for true-self fantasies will continue to flourish worldwide for some time, even if most people who buy into that rhetoric are also at least dimly aware that selves aren't the kinds of entities that can preexist real, culturally embedded, and socially interactive upbringing.

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