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Contributed Content Visual and New Media Review

Baroque Proliferations

FROM THE SERIES: [Book Forum: The Blind Man](#)



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This is a wild book. There is no better word to describe it, really. *Wild* as in unsettling, riveting, sweeping you off your feet. *Wild* as in roller-coaster rides. *Wild* as in delirious. The kind of wildness that makes you wonder what becomes of anthropology after this book.

It all begins with this single image, a photograph the author took of a blind man at the foot of Sacré Coeur in Paris. That photograph triggers the author's imagination, and the book basically reports on the phantasmatic thought processes that follow.

There is a fascinating and contagious kind of obsessing going on in this book, a determined decision by the author to keep on thinking, imagining, associating, and fantasizing about that image. Indeed, at times it feels as if Desjarlais's excessive imaginations seek to exhaust that one picture he took, throwing thoughts at it until it breaks. The effort made me think of a film by Fiona Tan called *Ascent* (2016), which for eighty long minutes shows still images of Mount Fuji. Thousands of them. An avalanche of postcards, flyers, sketches, paintings, photographs, you name it. There is voiceover narration, but I do not really remember what it was about, because at some point you begin to see that the filmmaker is trying to exhaust the conic shape of the volcano as it appears again and again and again and again, up front or in the background, center stage or offhandedly set aside, but always there. Mount Fuji. Interestingly, Tan loses her battle with the volcano: her film does not succeed in exhausting the image. And so it is with the blind man. Thought does not exhaust the mystery of his being.

But while the mystery may not be resolved, Desjarlais's unique mode of doing anthropology produces many important insights about our discipline. For example, *The Blind Man* forces us to rethink the anthropological dictum that it is through conversation and dialogue that we learn about the others we study. Desjarlais keeps hesitating to speak to the blind man who he has been following and observing for such a long time, and who has become such an imposing presence in his mind. Early on in the book, I found myself thinking: "Come on, Robert, speak to the guy! That's what anthropologists do to get answers to their questions!" But gradually it dawned on me that whatever answer the blind man might have produced, the phantasmatic thought processes in the author's mind would not have stopped proliferating. In fact, the answer might have been quite flat: "Yes, I am from the Maghreb" or "no, I'm not." Statements you would not want to trade for Desjarlais's baroque meditations on sight, eye disease, photography, selfies, phantoms, images, research ethics, to mention but some of the themes that are being addressed. One might

say that Desjarlais self-consciously takes up the role of the allegorist: his blind man never gets to speak for himself, remaining an allegorical figure in an anthropological tale on vision. The question that is forced upon us is whether or not all anthropologists are allegorists, including the ones who do engage in conversation with our informants. Do we not all use whatever ethnographic information we bring from the field to address larger theoretical issues?

Desjarlais's reluctance to engage the blind man in a dialogue—and his investment in vision as his prime mode of getting to know the world—gives a new boost to that worn-out notion of participant-observation. Dejarlais recalls the figure of the wallflower: the girl who is found in the dance hall every night but never gets asked to dance. Leaning against the wall, in the semidark, she knows the dances by looking and by looking only. No one knows the steps better, the swirls and turns, the movements of the hips and the head, but the wallflower never gets to consummate the dance (cf. Savigliano 1996). A sad figure, one might think. But Fernando Pessoa, the Portuguese poet, sees it differently:

There exist contemplative souls who have lived more intensely, more widely, more tumultuously than others who have lived their lives purely externally. The end result is what matters. What one felt was what one experienced. . . . The person standing apart in the corner of the room dances with all the dancers. He sees everything and because he sees, he experiences everything. When it comes down to it, it is just another feeling, and seeing or even remembering someone's body is just as good as any actual contact. Thus when I see others dance, I dance too. (Pessoa 2003, 74)

Observation, Desjarlais taught me, *is* participation.

There are moments in *The Blind Man* where Desjarlais himself seeks to address the question of what becomes of anthropology in the light of his thoughts. "What I offer is an anthropology of the phantasmatic," he writes, as distinguished from an anthropology of the concrete real. I would say that he is far too modest when requesting some space for the anthropology he proposes. For if his book shows one thing, it is that the concrete real is always inextricably caught up in phantasmatic processes. In fact, I no longer know what an anthropology of the concrete real would be, other than a phantasy in its own right. As Slavoj Žižek once argued, the colloquial opposition of reality and fantasy is utterly

misleading. “Fantasy is on the side of reality,” Žižek (1997, 66) wrote, “it sustains the subject’s ‘sense of reality.’” This, I would say, is what Desjarlais’s tale of the blind man shows us, page after page after page.

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