

Ghosts Count

Gil Anidjar

I have finally begun to develop an interest in numbers. Taking my cue from Alan Klima, I will have to assume that none of this has anything to do with Christianity, global or other, though it may yet reveal something of “Christian accounting.”¹ At the time of writing, in any case, “it is 2001 by Christian accounting, which is not quite foreign to ... anyone around here, where it is also 2544 in the Buddhist calendar.”²

I had occasional use for numbers before, to be sure, but am still finding arithmetics arduous, along with the rest of the mathematical fields. Still, I have been reading this and that in order to do my part and improve, even increase, the scale of numeracy rates, at least my own. How to decide, though, how to calculate, whether Klima’s brilliant, fantastically moving and seriously haunting book, is helping me with the questions accumulating in my head about numbers? And when I say “questions,” it is to a great extent because the mathematician Michael Harris (a colleague of mine in New York, the city newly known, until recently, as “the epicenter of the pandemic”) shed significant light on the matter, when he wrote of inviting his readers “to think of a number neither as a thing nor as a platonic idea but rather as *an answer to a question*.”³ Harris goes on to explain that, like much of pure mathematics today, he is ultimately more interested in “the kinds of questions that can be asked about them,” that he is himself of the habit of “questioning questions, rather than answering them” (ibid.).

Imagine my surprise when, the lockdown still very much in effect, I discovered I was reading a significantly different book, not just a book about numbers, not quite an anthropology of numbers (such as was proposed by, say, Thomas Crump),⁴ but “an anthropology of fantasy,” as Klima himself phrases it (5), really “a Gothic ethnography,” one powerfully — and pertinently — engaged with any number (!) of “unassimilated entities,” “indefinite entities,” real or imagined, real *and* imagined (29). We shall return to those (and perhaps they are already here, which is to say, “everywhere and nowhere”), but for now I will note, no doubt unfairly given the innovative nature of Klima’s writing, that, true to some of the best origin stories of anthropology from Robertson-Smith to Mary Douglas, Klima also brings us back to the future of *contagion*, that most resilient trope long slapped onto other cultures, “primitive cultures,” as they called people in the old days.⁵ Klima very much tells a story (many haunting stories, in fact), and his is, *in sum*, the story of an uncertain present, the story of an “Asian contagion,” an “unexpectedly virulent contagion.”⁶ A story and a fact of nature, no doubt, one inextricably related to “innumerable and perhaps

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incommensurable financial instruments”⁷ and enumerative practices — “a mess of observations, readings, and numbers”⁸ (which is precisely what the news media looks like these days, or, in Klima’s much better phrasing, “our dreamworld’s orchestra of numbers” [41]). It is also a story — an account — of “the Asian miracle/Asian contagion cycle” (86), a story that could be “attributed to a moral transgression by the first population that is imagined to have transmitted the virus to the others.”⁹ Like the plague (“the Second Pandemic,” by historians’ count, but also the Third) and like smallpox for Native Americans, like cholera and like the 1957 influenza (H2N2) and since, contagion is construed as coming from the East (is it not funny how it does that? True, sometimes disease comes from Africa, or else it is the so-called “Spanish” influenza —H1N1 — and it comes from Kansas,¹⁰ but we’re not in Kansas anymore). For instance, before China, “the Ottoman Empire, as the ‘sick man of Europe,’ came to represent a plague exporter, the home of all plagues that assailed Europe’s shores.”¹¹ Here at work, in any case, is a distinct virus. It is a “Thai virus,” which was going to be better handled by “those who are now morally more suited to dictate the cure to the patient” (85). WHO (as Abbott and Costello might ask)? No, the IMF.¹²

Not that it makes a big difference, considering what Nitsan Chorev explains, namely that “an examination of the WHO policies in the 1970s–1980s and the 1990s–2000s reveals a substantial shift in focus from social development to economic growth and from equity to cost effectiveness, which reflects a *selective* correspondence with the shift in the dominant logic at the international level.”¹³

Which brings us back to numbers. And it is a funny thing — unless it is a serious one? —¹⁴ about numbers that they are already endowed with all the attributes we might need to discuss them cogently. Or so we might think. Over the course of a well-plodded history, numbers have accumulated multifarious features that, manifestly meaningful, are also (and *precisely*, mind you) void of the meaning we might otherwise expect. “Arabic numerals” could alert us to “the cultural and social dimension of numbers,” and to ethnomathematics.¹⁵ Those may even turn out to be “Indian,” which might then give you the false hope of a different conception of the so-called “Indic” in its relation to “Islamic mathematics” and other things Islamic.¹⁶ Or, assuming it makes any sense, the question, “are numbers real?” (which continues to divide the “realists” — also called platonists or logicists — from the “psychologists,” “constructivists” and “formalists”) will thus not be addressed in any serious way under the rubric of “real numbers,” a designation established by René Descartes, who wanted, logically, to distinguish those line-measuring instruments, from what he called “imaginary numbers.” Which was not a compliment, for Descartes, who thought he could diminish the significance of the square root of negative numbers. Things did not work out that way, since, as it happens, numbers are not necessarily rational. Or “rational.” After reading Klima, we might of course wish to revisit these assertions, but that too will have little

to do with rational numbers (or with irrational ones, for that matter). Shall we say that numbers are “natural” then? Or, as we might soon wish to ask, *supernatural*? Obviously not a question to be answered in the preserve of “natural numbers.” Yet, these and preceding matters may nonetheless attune us to what Alain Badiou foregrounds as “the mystery” in which mathematics is wrapped. It is “a mystery in broad daylight,” of course, whereby one might be “using the false to obtain the true via the impossible.” Which leads Badiou to say that what mathematics, what numbers teach us, is that “the real will be revealed when an ‘impossible’ object is found.”¹⁷

Alan Klima, who calls on us “to declare an accurate and adequate analysis of reality, and/or the impossibility of doing so” (26), certainly discovered impossible objects, a compelling “world of specters” (1), “ideas of matter and bodies of this world . . . seized by a beyond, by autonomously consensual value, or by the possible impossibility of this divide being real” (13). But are these numbers? Or, to continue with Badiou and his insistence, are mathematics “the science of everything that is,” the only way to “think purely formal structures, that is to say, structures indeterminate as to their material characteristics”?¹⁸ Echoing Klima on fantasy, Badiou goes on to ask: “How is it possible to think that there’s no real here other than our own playful invention?” Just earlier, Badiou had come close to Doubting Thomas, close to feeling and believing: “What the nature of that real is, is a different discussion. But at any rate you have the feeling of touching an external reality, in the sense that it’s not just a fabrication of the mind” (64).

In his own contribution to the anthropology of numbers, Thomas Crump had reached the conclusion that “numbers in a sense control the wills of those who make use of them. The respect and attention given to numbers in the many different cultures I have examined shows how widespread is this sense of being controlled by numbers.”¹⁹ Crump might as well have spoken about ghosts. “Ghosts and numbers,” is the way Klima repeatedly puts it, who seems to hesitate nevertheless as to the precise realm (one or two?) of their order and composition (the word *algebra*, by the way, comes from the Arabic, *al-jabr*, which the OED glosses as “restoration (of anything which is missing, lost, out of place, or lacking), reunion of broken parts, (hence specifically) surgical treatment of fractures < *jabara* to restore, to reunite, (hence specifically in a medical context) to set broken bones”).

“The two realms, ghosts and numbers, seem ordained, each to the other” (35). It is quite an algebra, this “association of ghost and numbers” (*ibid.*), this question, “our question of ghosts and numbers” (36). An entire “world of apparitions and numbers” (44); a nation that “pulsates with ghosts and numbers” (67). It renders all the more striking that, concerned throughout with the innumerable and the uncountable, Klima would still be telling us that “the cogito-cultural infrastructure” is unable “to process so many spirits so fast,” but also

that “there are far too many around to expel” (64-65). Proliferation galore, in other words. An “interconnected multitude of multiplicities” (70), a “proliferation of terms” (71). Here and elsewhere, “the spirit wagers his authority on many different numbers at the same time, and the more the better. And the more he turns out to be right, the more his authority grows” (84). Which is another way to say: *ghosts count* (135, 143).²⁰ As do spirit mediums, which is to say, women (99).

Ghosts and numbers. Klima says that we need to refigure “the relationship between . . . ghosts and numbers” (153). We must reconsider “the immateriality that tries to eclipse the rest, that ‘ghost’ of numbers and economy” (ibid.). And do note the scare quotes. For it might turn out that ghosts are not real after all. Which came as a surprise. As unreal as numbers, in any case. “We cannot be counted, not in truth.” Counted? In truth? This is not Klima speaking, of course, but his ghostly “visitor,” the “girl prophet.” And what the ghost says is that “In truth, we are beyond the subjection of numbers. We are. And we are without a need of counting” (159).

Mais il faut bien compter, Derrida would remind us.²¹ And numbers, like ghosts, proliferate. The number of the dead and the number of the living. The murdered and the jailed. The infected and the recovered. The innumerable and the uncounted. The undocumented and the unreported. Social distance and economic recovery. Likes and #cancelled. People and things. Stocks and sales. Voters and protesters. Rates and ratios. Debt and GDP. Banks and schools. Books and bombs. Health and wealth. Religions and Races. Speed, sex, and time itself. Everything is, in fact, measured and counted, sustained by or exposed to numbers, and nothing therefore is beyond count, beyond the unequal *subjection* of numbers. In this true and fantastic shadow economy, the only one that counts, the game is rigged and the numbers are always winning, therefore. This is perhaps because of Pythagoras. Or else because of what Derrida might have called a generalized arithmetics (Derrida went for “hauntology” instead), signaling toward the uncountable, the innumerable ghosts. This hardly tell us what our question is (as Michael Harris proposed). But it does tell us that numbers are neither models nor symbols. They are neither real nor imaginary. Numbers are supernatureculture, to deploy Mayanthi Fernando’s exacting term.²² What seems at once most certain and uncertain, in any case, what appears most natural and supernatural, fantastical and incalculable, is that “one can neither classify nor count the ghost, it is number itself, it is numerous, innumerable as number, one can neither count on it nor with it. There is but one of them and already there are too many.”²³

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***Arab: A History of the Enemy* (Stanford UP, 2003) and, most recently, *Qu'appelle-t-on destruction?* (Heidegger, Derrida) (Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 2017)**

¹ I have my doubts, of course, but I shall keep them in check here. Then again, my understanding of Christianity, of political and economic theology, is admittedly expansive. I'll take the liberty here to express my gratitude to Rajbir Singh Judge for his initial pushes, his kind encouragements, and his thoughtful reading.

² Alan Klima, *Ethnography #9* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 3; this is the only reference to anything Christian in the book, so the word "accounting" peaked my interest.

³ Michael Harris, *Mathematics Without Apologies: Portrait of a Problematic Vocation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), xvii.

⁴ Thomas Crump, *The Anthropology of Numbers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

⁵ On which, please, read Franz Steiner's *Taboo* for another piece of pertinent and still innovative anthropology (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1967 [1956]).

⁶ Klima, *Ethnography #9*, 75, 81, 85. In his own fascinating work, Frédéric Keck raises questions that are interestingly proximate to Klima's, questions such as "what do 'avian reservoirs' reveal for anthropologists working in Asia? Or: what do birds with flu viruses reveal about the position of Asia in the global economy" (F. Keck, *Avian Reservoirs: Virus Hunters and Birdwatchers in Chinese Sentinel Posts* [Durham: Duke University Press, 2020], 3). Oddly anticipating the President of the United States (but there is a long, sedimented tradition there, Keck goes on to acknowledge that "the notion of 'avian reservoir' could be criticized for suggesting that Asian populations live in too much proximity with their chicken and pigs [or ghosts — GA]; and indeed, 'avian reservoirs' sounds like a stigmatization of 'Asian people' as a 'reservoir for viruses' . . . But I want to take a cynegetic view of Avian reservoirs . . ." (4).

⁷ Klima, *Ethnography #9*, 119; I was struck by the few but significant mentions of the "innumerable" and the "uncountable" in Klima's prose. There are "innumerable people" (3) and those "innumerable . . . financial instruments," I mention above; there are also "innumerable movies and TV shows" made about Mae Nak Phrakhanong (150) and the "innumerable press reports, editorials, and academic articles" that carry the tired verities of Orientalism (174n12). There are "uncountable rituals" (66) and "huge amounts of uncountable currency" (81), and there is "an uncountable amount of time" for one to stumble around the village (135).

⁸ Klima, *Ethnography #9*, 2.

⁹ Klima, *Ethnography #9*, 85; similarly interested in contagion, Rosalind Morris confirms that "in the wake of the 1997 crash . . . there emerged what many economic pundits described as a pan-Asian 'plague' (sometimes called a 'flu') of currency speculation and economic collapse" (R.C. Morris, "Failures of Domestication: Speculations on Globality, Economy, and the Sex of Excess in Thailand," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 13:1 [Spring 2002], 71). The revenant, in Morris' account, is not a ghost (though there is that too), but the figure of the prostitute.

¹⁰ John M. Barry, "The site of origin of the 1918 influenza pandemic and its public health implications," *Journal of Translational Medicine* 2: 3 (2004), n.p.

¹¹ Nühket Varlik, *Plague and Empire in the Early Modern Mediterranean World: The Ottoman Experience, 1347-1600* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 3.

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¹² The “International Moral Fund,” as Klima calls it, had handed Thailand “a clean bill of health” (79), a perfect credit score, just as the Dean of Columbia University Business School would do in 2007 with Iceland (<https://poetsandquants.com/2011/05/18/inside-job-causes-changes-at-columbia/?pq-category=business-school-news/>; Accessed June 16, 2020)

¹³ Nitsan Chorev, *The World Health Organization Between North and South* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), 9.

¹⁴ That which is serious, which *counts* as serious, indeed, the “seriously real” and seriousness itself constitute a major preoccupation of *Ethnography* #9 (e.g., 16-19, 29, 67).

¹⁵ See, e.g., *Mathematics Across Cultures: The History of Non-Western Mathematics*, Helaine Selin, ed. (Dordrecht: Springer Science+Business Media, 2000).

¹⁶ Mana Kia, *Persianate Selves: Memories of Place and Origin Before Nationalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020), 98; Rajbir Singh Judge, “The Invisible Hand of the Indic,” forthcoming in *Cultural Critique* 110 (Winter 2021).

¹⁷ Alain Badiou with Gilles Haéri, *In Praise of Mathematics*, trans. Susan Spitzer (Cambridge: Polity, 2016), 90-91.

¹⁸ Badiou, *In Praise*, 65.

¹⁹ Crump, *The Anthropology of Numbers*, 13.

²⁰ I do not mean, with this phrase, to answer Diane Nelson’s poignant question, and certainly not in any definite way, but rather to echo the very complexity of the question “who counts?” (Diane M. Nelson, *Who Counts? The Mathematics of Death and Life after Genocide* [Durham: Duke University Press, 2015]).

²¹ Jacques Derrida, “‘Eating Well,’ or the Calculation of the Subject: An Interview with Jacques Derrida,” in *Who Comes After the Subject*, Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor & Jean-Luc Nancy, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1991), 108; in the French original Derrida says “il faut bien manger” (one must eat well; one might as well eat) and accordingly goes on to assert: “il faut du calcul.”

²² See Mayanthi Fernando on “Supernatureculture” at <https://tif.ssrc.org/2017/12/11/supernatureculture/> (Accessed June 16, 2020).

²³ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 2006), 173.