

## Nothing Is

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The thinking mind has trouble with nothingness. As long as that trouble reigns supreme, I don't know how easily anthropology or scholarship in general will be able to interact with certain forms of life and being out and about in the world and there will always appear to be somewhat of an impasse. To me, at this moment, I would call that impasse one between the secular and the religious. But that's just a way of pointing in a certain direction and starting a certain kind of conversation, bringing something more approachable into association with nothingness, which is so much trouble to approach that I don't even know how to begin to explain what's already seriously wrong with the idea of "approaching" it itself.

*Ethnography #9* is perhaps an attempt to address the trouble with nothingness, and even secularism for that matter, in a manner that doesn't trip over itself this way and is only on rare occasion voiced in the direct kind of language I am using now. Nevertheless, I am going to retain that language for a short while here as a kind of experiment, but this will still require dipping into a genre of literary form. The premise of much science fiction: What if...

What if the thinking mind was good with nothingness? So, in this case, when hearing or reading the word one is not immediately associating it with less than. Not associating it with blankness, not associating it with the state of your coffee cup: empty = bad, full=good. It doesn't call up a void, a vacuum. Imagine a world where nothingness has nothing to do with nothing. And we don't need therefore to hyphenate it as if to say, don't worry, we don't mean nothing here, we mean not-a-thing, so it's all good, you see? Let's imagine this wacky sci-fi world where the thinking mind doesn't have trouble with thoughts like "I'm nothing" or "you make me feel like I'm nothing" or "I want to be something" and "be all that you can be." It doesn't, in this weird world, have anything to do with these things, so one can't really think in reaction to the thought of nothingness, "people need to recognize their common plight, which is something" or "things are actually happening that are defined and definable and are not nothing," those reactive things won't be said in this world because no one's thinking mind is fixated on the idea that nothingness is actually implicated in such thoughts, which have nothing to do with it and which obviously are completely unrelated to nothingness.

So here nothingness is not something: it's not a blank, which is something. It's not less than, nor is it nothing, which are somethings.

Meanwhile, for the thinking mind outside this sci-fi world, to be nothing is to be diminished. To be nothing is to be less than. A blank. A null. A void.

But what if nothingness is not any of these things and isn't even a thing, despite the grammar of subjects and objects which I take from our world. Nothingness is not a thing and you aren't ever going to see or apprehend nothingness, as an object in your perception.

You can't see it over there, somewhere, because it is you yourself.

And whatever that is, you are, that cannot be seen.

As Tanzeen Doha comments upon the idea of gothic ethnography in the introduction to these conversations, "There is a fundamental relation between Islam and gothic ethnography because both de-signify our assumptions about what it is that makes us subjects in the first place. In fact, they both unsettle our assumption that it is us who are making assumptions, that it is us who are living our lives." There is a displacement of the subject which is equivalent to a displacement of secularity in *Ethnography #9* and which comes with the "nothingness" of its narrator, who was once its main character, and by the end of the text and at least by implication if not otherwise, of everyone. It's not that there is a method of "gothic ethnography" that enables that, as the term is meant at least in a small part as tongue-in-cheek, mirroring the practice of naming one's new approach as though the discipline will now commence practicing it. But we can notice there is an akin-ness to the realism in gothic literature that was essential to its method for producing creepiness through, in the case of that literature, performing clashes of modern life with intruding entities and senses of the real that should not be, including of course confounding the sense of what it means to be a human or even what is life. By conjoining gothic realism with the documentary realism of ethnography, perhaps one can find a kind of register for voices speaking about what is true in a cohabitation that simultaneously calls into question the experience of separate kinds of entities, of habits and assumptions about what being a subject and object is, and in which nothingness is generative of life and worlds rather than simply their negation, the latter being a conclusion which the lone rational subject in command of their thoughts and in mastery of their arguments, all too often arrives at.

On the other hand, one could, perhaps, see in this mode of drawing on literature and fiction a kind of backing down and backing out, for in bringing in fictional form (but not always or necessarily fictional content) there could be, arguably, a kind of pressure release valve because of suspension of disbelief with respect to some of the lines with which secular materialism attempts to draw itself a trace of existence. In some of the voices in the book, inside of a fictional form that may or may not contain fictional content, I may not be appearing to say "ghosts are real" exactly. Despite the fact that they are.

To repeat that with other words: I'm pretty sure I'm qualified enough to say I know what many people mean when they say "real," at least some of the time, and therefore prepared to say that whatever they think real things are, ghosts are also one of that, a statement with which you might agree or disagree. We are communicating now. Yet it is precisely that kind of communication that is suspicious, because in agreeing or disagreeing there is just so much damn understanding going on. Like we know what we are talking about, and I don't think that's the case at all. Not you and not me. And in saying not you and not me I'm not simply saying, as the habit of mind might assume, that there is a you and a me who either has or has not understanding. The condition of unknowing is what these figures of subjectivity are often an attempt to obscure. So, one of the fundamental reasons to choose such a skewed register for *Ethnography #9* is to just displace all that from the start and in the very form of it. As Doha

writes, “if anthropology of ‘the real’ is an anthropology of subjects, a gothic ethnography begins from the opposite position, with the impossibility of the subject, with no-thing.”

Which is not a problem, in every instance, that causes senseless confusion in the thinking mind, causes a lack of any form or manifestation, or some sort of void, and which then requires my sci-fi solution above to put out the fire and alarms. As Doha shows, there are other ways—simultaneously lending a hint to why I started here proposing that reckoning with the religious in secular thoughts is possibly the same impasse that nothingness presents for the thinking mind:

Muslims relate to each other and to others through the facticity of the unseen as the mediator for all earthly and heavenly relations. In fact, it is categorically impossible for Muslims to emerge *as themselves* if they are mediated by the seen or the representable (i.e., Jesus, the monarch, the Enlightenment, race, or the market). Muslims are not secular social constructs, nor are they created by a God whose image is available to us. In this sense, the unseen is the (pre)condition that allows for the corporeal existence of Muslims.

This appears to abut directly upon premises of secularism and materialism. Now in both saying that, and alighting upon this as significant, I may be in a rudimentary state of my thought. I don’t actually know that drawing a line in the sand here is the right thing to do or say. If I knew it was, I would say what I am saying now but without any hesitation about whether it is skillful to do so: either the unseen is a social construct held in the brains of bodily humans, or the bodies are the constructs of the unseen.

How the latter can ever be approached through the assumptions of the former is beyond me. We have an impasse. But since I’m hardly the first person in world history to have noticed this, perhaps my mediations are of little use here. “Klima is not a philosopher,” Doha writes. Perhaps those are wise words.

Perhaps the choice that I’m throwing out there could simply be the choice between familiar ways of scholarship and familiar values native to that media, on one side, and unfamiliar ways on the other. Generalized in this way, to the point of being almost innocuous, at least the choice has become translated, or hidden and smuggled, into something else quite open to it. I would say this “something else” status is true of my discipline, anthropology, a situation for which I am very grateful.

And yet this choice, however conceived or worded, is not as innocuous as the comfort-tempted version of my self would like to think, and as the contributors to this discussion all in one way or a different another, point out.

This is most poignantly expressed, perhaps, in Erica Robles-Anderson’s championing of the character Janpen, who she sees as being a girl “in the first instance.” The embodied subjectivity of girls, and the particular details of Janpen as a character inside a story set in Northern Thailand and told by a narrator in a book, are at stake.

Thus appear choices to by-pass the framing in the book where in the very first manifestation she is spirit and, from the start, is one of the most omniscient narrators ever (who then goes on to conjure Janpen, who she no longer is, in a story). That does not remain by-passed for long, however, when attention is turned to media form, something which Erica Robles-Anderson both highlights and enhances in her contribution here. Given her adept reading of the book through the lens of media, I can't help but feel a kind of camaraderie, almost as though I'm thinking, "it's only people like her and I who really get it." Well, not "almost as though." I admit I was. I was thinking that. And she does get it, I think, or we do, managing right up to the edge of where I'm trying to get the right reader to go, and look. Harkening to prior work of mine, Robles-Anderson in fact invokes the injunction "just look." In the end, she wonders "what is it I'm supposed to see?"

But... yeah, I'm good. I'll just stick with the girl side of it.

Which is fair enough. That is a fair majority of the book's content. It's not that being a girl, a girl in Thailand of that time, and having religious aspirations that are thwarted by gender dynamics, and all the other things, most of them typical, that happen to Janpen in the story that the spirit tells are of no concern in the book. These details wouldn't appear if they were of no concern. These are among the subjects that are represented in *Ethnography #9*. But both the book and she are more than that.

And also, less. To begin to answer a question that surprisingly, and happily, has never been asked of me: Janpen is based in a real historical person with many of her life events in the book corresponding to the course of her body and mind in a certain place in time, with a few events actually belonging to people similar to her, and other kinds of events and stories adhering too, including really existing stories. But she is also emptiness, something that dawns in her awareness inside the story, eventually, but always was so all along from the first moment as a narrator, and beyond that as the source of the book itself.

A book where someone named Janpen appeared, seeming at different moments to be a narrator, a child, a spirit, a girl, and something greater, and being you, and I, and not a thing, but not even everything, greater than that even.

"Like so many other women who come to presence in the canon her significance is her death," writes Nobles-Anderson here.

But is that all she is, a girl that dies? Why not see more?

Or is it, given our impasse, where some see more, others see less?

Only one facet is chosen here, a choice to see her as a girl, and a girl who must die, and only as representing a condition of marginality that girls often endure, although she—when limited to the character inside the story that her spirit tells as spirit—can't be said to *not* be any of these things either, because all of that was quite deliberately detailed. Yet quite unlike Tolstoy's and Flaubert's rather unsubtle critique of what is supposed to be a certain type of

woman, a critique performed in female characters like Madam Bovary or Anna Karenina, Janpen is greater than a character and even a narrator and greater than the death of what she was, which does technically happen inside the mere story, a story which is just a shadow of the book, a book which is just a shadow of what she is.

The choice, however, to limit one's concern only to one aspect, and choose girl, is a valid one. We care about what we care about and that is our choice and perhaps the best choice. It's just that perhaps there is a place in this world for seeing more and seeing other, and a place for seeing both at the same time. We're at an impasse. Emptiness appears to be easily thwarted.

That there is nothing else to see however, could be rooted in certain habits of mind where being no-thing is associated in thought with being less than something, that a screen is a pale or thin version of reality, and that therefore the character needs defending from being relegated to some diminutive status of being "no thing but screens," as though the only possible meaning of this is to be less, a blank.

It seems like a self-evident choice if put in those terms, and when seen in such terms, leads to only one possible choice, at least in my feeling, one choice that is ethical, and proper, and good, requiring no castigation, the other being kind of shameful.

Yet I, having irrevocably chosen the shameful side (there's no going back now), just said moments ago that we should be under no delusions that we are at an impasse that is not innocuous. Robles-Anderson calls our attention to that and perhaps rightly closes off the pressure-release-valve tactic of belief suspension through fictional form or media form (a far deeper concept) which hid and smuggled in the collision with secularity and materialism. She sees through that, and that is why she sees a choice and exposes something of what seems like a stake, slamming the door shut to nothingness in the very, very end by revealing everything she described about media in the book, seemingly of interest, and about Janpen, as instead exactly and precisely a reproduction of what is required for the oppressive condition of girls.

But don't look.

Or look away. At this moment I feel I really would rather retreat and inhabit the comfort of story and let the sense of something of the Greater One seep in softly or even without notice.

And yet that is hardly a response to the non-innocuous impasse, and something wants to respond. How is it that in secular thought so often the religious is seen to be wicked? I don't have an answer to that, but at least this heightens the sense of trouble with the secular and religious, identifies a purpose for another ethnography or gothic ethnography that can do it better, and that would, somehow, to retain my phraseology at least, actually succeed in rendering nothingness, admittedly somewhat unavailable, as the so very much more that it is, such that it could not be dismissed as diminishing, nothing and blank, the opposite of what is

the case, and so possibly compete with, or at least lend nuance to, or better, lend power to values that are already taken to be self-evident and are so easily available.

But other ways than gothic ethnography exist. Interestingly, both Rajbir Singh Judge and Allen Feldman here find different economies, if you will, of poetics than that in *Ethnography #9* and which may prove to be more promising than the book.

Rajbir Singh Judge writes a juxtaposed poetic/theoretical recitation on the choice of a conventional register that admits spirit in secular inclusivity, but only as sign of something else that is more social scientifically real, or to function as a placeholder for a lacuna in scholarly logic. While on the one hand being just about as literal and explicit as one can get about this choice that perniciously seems to be taken again and again, and even going further, through Asad and Minh-ha, connecting that choice to one capitulating or not in Imperialism (or that's my reading), it is in a different and juxtaposed language that Judge expresses the difficult ground of troubled relatives and relations with conflicting relationships to spirit. This is captured, heightened even, by story and lyrical language and through that performance Judge asserts strongly, without having to say it, that writing is "writing as such" and in that awareness lies something great. Maybe I was wrong just now, I almost want to say, when I made in the figure of "the comfort of story" less of writing than what it really is.

Much differently, and I will very deliberately stick to the aspect of style here, Allen Feldman reaches a kind of ecstasy of critical theoretical poetics that might, in the divide, perhaps too naïve, between the secular and religious with which I opened, seem to be irrevocably on one side, and yet reminds us that things are not always how they appear. Harkening significantly to pre and post war vocabularies (and you know which war I'm talking about) and having whipped them up for a couple decades in application to pressing events in our world, Feldman reanimates vocabularies that are after all formative of many of our writing selves, not to mention Feldman's writing itself which in my biography, at least, is unquestionably formative. Here the writing takes on an excess of layering that recalls the unseen significance built up through montage, while exploding beyond the simple concept of montage into a register where everything that is base and mundane and oppressive in our world becomes alive with significance and message. To stay on the level of "writing as such," we have to admit that there is something too simple about religious vs. secular when we speak in writing because inspiration can take any form. It cannot be limited to one form. It is not our place to do that.

Likewise, as Gil Anidjar explores here, there is so much more to numbers that can't be limited to the obvious connection to a certain kind of economic logic. To choose that logic as the starting point for understanding is to preclude apprehending anything more significant about numbers at all. It is in the—I'm tempted to say—*innumerable* questions Anidjar opens about numbers, spanning mathematical theory and philosophy and his own ruminations and struggles with mathematics, that makes it impossible to suppose that numbers, or ghosts, are somehow already coopted to capital and explained by it. Similarly, I am in *Ethnography #9* not simply representing past and future political calamities as results of the force of numbers and abstraction that reveal numbers as intertwined in capitalist crises in markets brought on by, say,

complex derivatives and algorithmic trading, nor attempting to discern the material bases for these phenomena or decipher the world of capital nor to diagnose it.

Now, one could pose against the idea that numbers represent an abstract accounting connected to a real material base or structure or forces, some recognition of things such as divination through numbers as an expression of meanings and morals constructed in a system of consensually held beliefs that are both represented and displaced by numbers in the manifest cultural content of groups. In Thailand, as in many other places in the world, this would yield incredibly rich ethnography, as numerology in Thailand has been fertilized for centuries from Indian and Chinese sources as well as by numerous neighboring peoples, most notably Khmer (Cambodian) sources. As fascinating as all that information might be, I'm not sure how to take that further other than the usual move of showing how all this cultural content connects to, or contests or somehow subverts, the forces and structures of concern that "we know" are really real and which we seem to naturally care about. In effect, a certain assumed social scientific reality would be performed in such a text and made to seem real and important.

In defense of that reality one might ask, do not regimes of numbers and abstraction in financial liberalization and automated economic decision making in media of electronic computing have devastating and deadly effects on the lives of people, creatures, life and the planet? Maybe so, to put it mildly. Do there appear to be patterned structures in social life that appear in thinking and feeling to be unjust and dangerous and have what seem to be catastrophic consequences in the most base and immediate senses? Perhaps indeed, to put it strangely.

Let's crank it up to eleven. There is an Anthropocene period, it is said, which signals the inevitable end of humans through the destruction they wreak on the matter of this world. But can humans or anyone or anything really destroy the planet? What arrogance to assume that humans can do anything of any significance to what is. It is only in a very small view in which it can even seem to be the case that humans can appear to be changing or rearranging a small portion of what is. And that's about as far as that small view can go. It's not like humans are actually creating or destroying or making more or less of what is, which "is" without their intention or consent. It's not like humans are one thing on one side acting upon something else on the receiving end of their actions, except in a very small view.

I know that sounds horrible and of course I'm just playing. Of course we naturally care about what we care about. Of course the largest portion of our social thought and philosophy should be practically oriented around those concerns (while I'm not sure I believe that exactly in terms of a ratio or proportion calculation, I would rather place my bet on that preponderance of concern than anything else).

The question is, should *all* concern be that way, which trickles into the question of: need all writing, all social science, or all anthropology be oriented in that matter. Or, could *some* choose to be oriented differently. Is there a place in this world where something else is chosen, expressed and pointed to? Or does that need to be shut down wherever and whenever

it appears? We seem to naturally care about life, but before we assume that life is to be preserved and death and destruction averted, well, what is life? There are “real” material structures and forces in the world with real effects and suffering, it seems, but what is the world? It’s assumed that we know this and that naturally life should be saved. But what is this material world, and what are you? Are you alive, and what is that even supposed to mean: you, life, are?

We are at the end of the Anthropocene. But, like, so what?

There is a “massive” force, yet not really mass, encircling the globe, yet not really a geometric form, of abstract values carried in numbers that in terms of nominal value is many thousands-fold greater than the entirety of global commerce of material goods. And I wouldn’t be mentioning the inconvenient fact of this ominous abstraction if it hadn’t already wreaked considerable havoc. So, it’s not like it isn’t evident. Yet isn’t our sensibility both formed in and more appropriately adapted to that world of material commerce rather than that other world which hangs over and around it? Isn’t our language, down to the grammar of subjects and objects and actions, suited to that mundane world, having originated in conceiving it, which is now the smaller and less economically significant one while also being the world in which we, at least without deep reflection, appear to be living? What makes us think that we are even remotely equipped to conceive of this other one? Yet this force is here and naturally we are alarmed, want to conceive it and want to act.

Again, perhaps the greater balance of our writing and thought should be oriented that way. But should all of it? Choosing to go all in like that seems like a big gamble to me.

What if we see this economic horror story, that is so real yet defies our common sense, as not a problem to be solved but as a sign or message or a teaching about the way we perceive the world and life and who and what we are? The presence of this force of abstraction that appears to dwarf materiality could be a representation, a sign, entering and appearing and taking form right in the midst of the human dream, to give a strong signal about how things actually are, or even rather rudely announce it.

And I mean this in a direct sense, and hopefully I am even making sense, such that it does not appear that I am pointing to the other genre of wake-up story, that humans have sinned, against the planet, against each other, have created a monster, and now the signs of the consequence of that sin is showing up. That’s still in the conventional view of the world. It’s not that kind of a sign that I am struggling to articulate (though that can be a good reading too). Instead, might it be a sign that the balance of what seems true, and palpable, and real is not accurate or even is backwards. Not that the phenomenon itself is not what it appears to be, but that it is showing us something else too, of which it is a figure. The “reality” is modelling something for us if only we could see it that way.

To see it entails a shift. It’s not exactly the same shift people make when they interpret, for gambling purposes, the Twin Towers collapse as a strong message about the auspiciousness of the number 2, but it is similar in the sense that the world is not what it



appears to be, simply there—and often “there” as a horrible problem—but is a message, a teaching, a dream.