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## **“IN YOUR WRITING I AM EXISTED”: READING THE HISTORY OF ANTHROPOLOGY VIA *TEXTURES OF THE ORDINARY***

In thinking about this sense of a home that one might find in the work of others, I am very grateful to have this opportunity<sup>1</sup> to discuss *Textures of the ordinary* (Das, 2020) which I receive with a deep sense of acquaintance but also of exciting unfamiliarity. As a way of flagging this conjoined sense of acquaintance and unfamiliarity, I pause over the dedication with which the book begins: “For Stanley Cavell. In your writing I am existed.” What a strangely gripping and unusual formulation: *I am existed*. What does this mean? One could not have said “in your writing I am born”, since each of us, usually, has multiple sources of birth and autochthony. And also “I am existed” signals not only birth but also growth and continuing education, or to put it more urgently, a struggle against non-life. So the dedication could be “in your writings I found breath and growth.”

Maybe I could say something similar to Veena? And yet, and this is part of Veena’s attraction as a teacher, with her such transactions between generations are not only one-way. Part of my excitement at a first reading of *Textures* is to see my own words and concepts appear so recurrently in this book. But that sounds a bit narcissistic, so let me pose the question of how thought moves from one to another and then further, more impersonally.

In the preface to *Textures* Veena describes the process of the composition of this book, built from essays that have appeared over the past two or so decades, as expressing “a process of allowing myself to be educated, as it were, in

public." (Das, 2020: 5) That sounds promising, but let's ask a further question. What state were we in prior to that education, and where do we find ourselves after it? I place this question next to the first line of Kant's famous essay, "What is Enlightenment?": "Enlightenment is man's release from his self-imposed immaturity" (Kant, 2006: 16). *Unmundigkeit*, the word used by Kant to describe the state of immaturity from which the human seeks or ought to seek freedom, translates both as "tutelage" and as "minority". Are there other ideas of continuing education we might arrive at, rather than as a linear passage into adulthood?

Whether or not we find our Wittgenstein or our Walden, early or late in life, it is among the key lessons of *Textures* that a continuing education, that is, to be open to the possibility of being teachable, even in adulthood, is that tutelage is not only reception. It is also an art of rewriting oneself, while still retaining traces, or more than just traces of earlier selves. Differently put, even with the essays that I have long read and taught in previous incarnations, for instance "Wittgenstein and Anthropology", which first appeared in the *Annual Review of Anthropology* in 1998, and which is, as Veena puts it, the *bija sutra*, or seed of this book, even with these previously familiar essays, the specific rewritings and additions, are as, if not more striking than the previously unpublished essays in this book.

More on the significance of these rewritings ahead, but first let me suggest an orienting thought on this question of the education of grownups as Cavell calls it. The Kantian proposition invites us to grow older. In contrast, we might say that to age well is perhaps to grow older and younger at the same time. Strange as that sounds, I offer this as my basic proposition for my comments today. In reading *Textures* I find the author to be older and younger than their previous books. So let me say more about each end of this movement, growing older and younger, beginning with the former arc. These movements are not entirely distinct, but for the sake of clarity I offer two ways of understanding this bipolar movement, first, in relation to concepts, and second, in relation to moods, or the range of moods and feelings that a thinker might be receptive to.

In terms of concepts, how does *Textures* relate to Veena's previous books? Most immediately, how is the concept of textures of the ordinary related to or distinct from the idea of a descent into the ordinary? One possible answer would be to read these books in an intensifying order of immanence, with textures entirely liberated from any transcendent structure or event or nation. But that is still too teleological an answer for my taste, so, instead of *Life and words or Afflictions*, let us begin earlier, with Veena's first book *Structure and cognition: aspects of Hindu caste and ritual* published in 1977. I should say that the thoughts I offer today build on two previous occasions where I was invited to comment formally on Veena's work. The first occasion was in 2018, when, in a reversal

of the customary order of transactions between generations, Veena invited me to write a foreword to the new edition of *Critical events* (Singh, 2018). An earlier occasion was an essay I wrote, titled “Conceptual vita” (2015a), for a festschrift, the subtitle of which was phrased in a recognizably Cavell-Wittgensteinian form, as “scenes of inheritance” in relation to Veena’s work.

My point of entry into this question of inheritance was to ask how one might narrate a scholarly life across texts. In “Conceptual vita”, I examined three books, written over three different decades: *Structure and cognition* (Das, 1977), *Critical events* (Das, 1995), and *Life and words* (Das, 2007). On a first reading the movement across these three books would seem to express a recognizable telos through which the history of anthropology is often narrated (Singh, 2016). For example, *Structure and cognition* is written in light of (quote) “the classic writings of Lévi-Strauss”. It analyzes a set of Sanskrit Puranas to understand the Hindu social order by (quote) “extracting the principles underlying the conceptual order envisaged in these myths” (Das, 1977: 4). In a seemingly sharp contrast, the events of the mid-1990s book, *Critical events* are newsworthy, historical events – the aftermath of the industrial disaster in Bhopal, Sikh militancy, the sati (or death by immolation) of Roop Kanvar. As the author puts it, the analytical aim of *Critical events* is to engage “living emotions” such as pain rather than (quote) “systems of abstract thought” (Das, 1995: 8). In this vein, we might say that *Life and words*, published in 2007, intensifies this impulse even further, with its hauntingly etched voices of particular interlocutors, like Asha and Manjit, with whom we learn ways of inhabiting the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, and the 1984 violence against Sikhs.

In terms of a continuing education, if it is to be received as continuous, we might ask: is a conversation possible between these generations and regenerations within an anthropological self, or selves, if such movements are not to be read as wholly self-negating, that is to say, in which a next generation or a next self must dialectically negate its predecessor, as with the familiar story that we were told, now thankfully less widely narrated, of a teleological movement from structuralism to so-called “post-structuralism”, whatever that meant, or even worse, a description of anthropological thought as moving from a so-called pre-reflexive past to a more self-reflexive, “interpretively” driven present. Are there other ways to understand maturity?

Rather than reading Veena’s first three books in opposition to one another, in “Conceptual vita”, I suggested that the twin concepts of structure and event help create a different, non-teleological map of continuities, transfigurations, and differences. *Structure and cognition* for instance, argues against the two best known organizing principles of Hinduism, and of South Asian studies at the time, Louis Dumont’s opposition of pure and impure, and M.N. Srinivas’s distinction of Sanskritic vs. lower caste Hinduism. Instead, Veena offers different oppositional coordinates, of ritual and myth as navigating (quote) “a zone

between life and death", with forms of liminality that potentially threaten and renew social and cosmic orders. (End quote) If we take these structural coordinates to be virtual, in a Bergsonian sense, then we can see these virtualities reappear one book, two books later. For instance, the habitation of a zone between life and death is a central issue of *Life and words*, as with Shanti, who tragically takes her own life, unable to live with the loss of her husband and sons, who were killed in the 1984 riots. In the time before her suicide (I quote from *Life and words*): "Shanti would often get up in the middle of the night and wander to the park opposite their house, where she would gather sticks and make them into little piles, which she would proceed to burn. She was unable to explain what she was doing, but some neighbors believed that she was trying to cremate the bodies of the dead" (Das, 2007: 142).

Resonantly, while the events of *Critical events* are some of the most newsworthy of its preceding decade (as the subtitle puts it, the book is: *An anthropological perspective on contemporary India*), the idea of the contemporary is not straightforwardly "historical" or timely. Rather, the quite varied events of the book, the Bhopal Gas tragedy, Sati, Sikh militancy, and questions of "founding" national violence, are understood through a transfiguration of concepts of sacrificial death and theodicy, or how suffering is understood to be distributed. This is not to point to a seamless continuity across these books, since the transfigurations are as important. For example, we can see a significant shift in the concept of the event, as we move from *Critical events* with its conception of the event, as (quote) "moments when new modes of action came into being" (Das, 1995: 12).

In contrast, *Life and words* sets out a significantly revised conception of the event, which many of us will remember, with questions like: when might an event be said to begin and end; the relation between event and everyday, and further, the ways in which skepticism, and voice, and the "evented-ness of the everyday" appeared as living concepts in *Life and words*. Within these forms of newness, as I indicate, it is still possible to read the concerns of *Structure and cognition*, if we do not take books to be dated only by their year of publication, or maturity to be a linear ascent, even as we may recognize findings and innovations.

Within this trajectory, if I was to extend "Conceptual vita" further, we might say that *Affliction* (published in 2015) extends this arc. The animating structure in some ways is the experience of ill-health in the context of urban poverty, and the concept of the event goes even further into the nooks and crannies of the ordinary, with what Veena calls the "quasi-event", or the aspects of life and non-life that we begin to see, for example with the opening chapter of *Affliction* on "how the body speaks", and the intensification of the question of what evented-ness might be, as we see how much happens, even when seemingly "nothing" is happening. So far so good. I was pleased to have arrived at a conceptual architecture, with which this body of thought may be received non-teleologically.

But then, *Textures of the ordinary* seems to disrupt this dynamic architecture of structure and event. Or does it? I want to leave this as a puzzle for further discussion, of what kind of a transfiguration this book might be from its past. Is *Textures* a further intensification of the “descent” into the ordinary or is it a rupture? Again, rather than an opposition between the implied transcendence or non-transcendence of “descent”, as against the purer immanence of “textures”, I suggest that perhaps a crucial point of continuity and transfiguration is what it means to go “further”, not as transcendence but still in a form of the metaphysical, understood as the joining of threads with that which exceeds what is immediately visible.

How is this further shore reached within the threads of *Textures*? This can take a variety of forms, for instance, with uncanny near-death voices of kin, or intimates whom we thought we knew. One discovery of this book, among others, which continues conversations that this group has had, led by Sandra and Andrew Brandel among others, is the methodological and metaphysical significance of details. (I quote from p.2 of *Textures*): “I contend that the ethnographic impulse to render the texture of the ordinary depends upon close attention to detail. But how much detail and what kind of detail?” (Das, 2020: 2).

Some chapters later, Veena suggests that more than Renato Rosaldo’s canonical anthropological essay on grief and the headhunter’s rage, written in the aftermath of his wife Shelley’s untimely death during fieldwork, his poems published nearly two decades after her death in 1981, (I quote from *Textures*) “go further, much further, in explicating the relations between biography and ethnography” (Das, 2020: 202). What is the meaning of the word further here? Consider the second aspect of Kant’s *unmundigkeit*, which we were meant to outgrow, not as tutelage, but “minority” or the minor. Here is how Veena suggests Rosaldo goes further (I quote) “...minor currents of stories, accidental encounters in the field, words blurted out that derange the context, are precisely what make up the texture of the ordinary in the present book. Rosaldo’s genius lies in the fact that he absorbs these as part of the milieu even when they were absent in the initial ethnography” (Das, 2020: 212).

Let us say that one form of aging and maturity evident in *Textures* is the temporality of return, as a mode of rewriting the self and one’s sense of others, as with the rewriting of the chapter on Swapan from *Affliction*, to arrive at a strikingly different thought in *Textures*, contra Foucault. So far I have spoken about the forms that maturity might take, without the negation of a younger self. But as you’ll remember, I opened with a two-part proposition: the author grows older and younger. So as steps to a conclusion, let me point out three ways in which this book also expresses forms of youthfulness.

While signs of youth may be many and varied, one feature we might say is a combative, agonistic spirit. As I mentioned, *Structure and cognition* began, as a young person might announce themselves, by contesting two global notables,

Dumont and Srinivas. Such contests though are not over prestige, but in sharpening what might be critical disagreements. One such critical disagreement in *Textures* is with Foucault. One of the discoveries of Foucault's *Psychiatric power* lectures, in which, as we know, he rewrites his own difference and distance from *Madness and civilization*, is the idea of madness not only as a discursive formation but what Foucault memorably called a "contest of wills". Within this battlefield, as Veena points out in *Textures*, in the Foucauldian microphysics of power, the family appears simply as a juncture or a node through which individuals are injected, as Foucault put it, into circuits of disciplinary power. In contrast, we might say that in continuity with earlier books and broader anthropological preoccupations, *Textures* points us to a much richer microphysics of power, where the lines of battle and care within kinship, intimacy and the domestic, can be unpredictably drawn and redrawn, in an aspect or threshold of life that would remain invisible with Foucault.

In itself, disagreement is not necessarily a sign of youth. What I also want to emphasize is the way in which critique may be voiced and addressed, at times, to everyone and no one. For instance, in Chapter 10 of *Textures*, "Concepts Crisscrossing", Veena is discussing her enduring preoccupation with the theme of sacrifice. Here is how she voices the problem: "I was bold enough in 1980 when I delivered the Henry Myers lecture to conclude it by saying 'Vedic sacrifice may be seen to constitute a global alternative to the Christian idea of sacrifice...' Of course, my claim went unheeded, but it was never extinguished for me" (Das, 2020: 285).

One can imagine a "mature" masculine way of flagging this kind of an unheeded claim, in ways that would make it even more unappealing. Instead, Veena lures us back to her argument by broaching it not as a critique of Eurocentrism, which it partly is, but – and here is how this chapter of *Textures* ends –, by offering this critique as (quote) "an expression of *gila* (a Hindi Urdu word) – a loving reproach – to my interlocutors in anthropology" (Das, 2020: 305).

One last expression of youthfulness or minority status, in which hopefully I played a small part! To hazard a contestable difference, we might say that Veena is justly known, if not explicitly so, as a profound writer of tragedies. In *Textures*, perhaps for the first time, other moods and genres appear. I hesitate to call the contrary of tragedy as comedy, although consider a character like Prem Singh (in Chapter 2, "A politics of the ordinary"), who writes a letter to George Bush as the leader of the world, and posts it to the "White House, Washington", about his neighbors spreading garbage in the streets, along with computer-generated notices on neighborhood walls, with texts like (I quote from Veena's translation), "Dogs in the form of Humans, of their Barking, Neither is there any specific time, nor any limit" (Das, 2020: 72). Molière or Chekov might recognize such a character as their own.

A shift in mood is not only to do with minor characters. The seed or the *bija sutra* has also altered slightly. I was delighted to notice a seemingly minor addition to the opening chapter, “Wittgenstein and anthropology”, which was not there in the 1998 version of the essay. Rather than comedy, following Cavell, we might call this addition, the entry of an Emerson mood. The addition I am referring to, briefly, is Veena’s expression of admiration for Cavell’s 2005 essay “Fred Astaire asserts the right to praise”. Perhaps it needed an Indian, steeped in Bollywood, to be genuinely moved by the philosophical appreciation of seemingly mundane cinematic song and dance.

In an Emerson mood, comedy can be deadly serious, as it is in Cavell’s emphasis on the political significance of Fred Astaire’s almost crazed dance with a black shoeshine boy, copying his moves and making them his own, *not*, as Cavell suggests, as an “appropriation of black culture”, but rather, citing Cavell in the passage quoted in *Textures*: “Astaire’s dance of praise is to be understood specifically as this painful and deadly irony of the white praise of a black culture whose very terms of praise it has appropriated, even climatically about being brushed with madness in one’s participation in it” (Das, 2020: 41). In other words, rather than appropriation Cavell takes Astaire to express a form of gratitude that makes (quote) “America’s partial democracy happier or more heartened than it might otherwise be” (Das, 2020: 42). We might take this to be the *bija* (or seed), for instance, of the marriage of Kuldip and Saba in a chapter ahead, and the question of what it might mean for a Hindu and a Muslim to be married, while maintaining their sense of self.

It is easy to dismiss cheerfulness, as Cavell variously shows us in relation to Emerson, but it is not to speak lightly, as I hope I have also indicated, in emphasizing this particular new opening in *Textures*. I had some role to play in this, he said modestly. I cite a line from my own 2015 book, *Poverty and the quest for life*, where I argued that one way to be more attentive to the “quality of life” was to be open to varying moods and thresholds of life. Here is a line from that book which remains dear to me (I quote): “Strangely enough, in my scholarly neck of the woods, such is the view of life (or is it only a mode of feigning gravitas?) that it is harder for now to prompt a smile than it is to confirm a global catastrophe. What spirits possess us?” (Singh, 2015b: 62).

That said, happily, or sadly, now in my 40s, having lived a bit more, I am naively less cheerful, and am preparing to write a dark and gloomy book. So maybe now Veena and I can switch places, and she can write comedies and I will write tragedies. And here I’ll stop with the beautiful last line with which *Textures* closes: “Should thought stop here?”

## NOTE

- 1 This essay was initially presented as a talk as part of a book panel on *Textures of the ordinary* organized by the Department of Philosophy, Sapienza, University of Rome. I am grateful to Piergiorgio Donatelli and Sandra Laugier for organizing this forum and for several years of ongoing conversation and inspiration, all the more cherished in these pandemic-infused years. I am grateful to Leticia Ferreira and Adriana Vianna for inviting me to share these thoughts as part of the special issue of *Sociologia & Anthropologia* honoring Veena Das's work.

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**"NA SUA ESCRITA EU SOU EXISTIDA": LENDO A  
HISTÓRIA DA ANTROPOLOGIA VIA *TEXTURES OF THE  
ORDINARY***

**Resumo**

Nesse ensaio tento sugerir uma forma não teleológica de ler a história da antropologia, situando o livro de Veena Das *Textures of the ordinary*, de 2020, em relação a suas obras anteriores, começando por *Structure and cognition: aspects of Hindu caste and ritual*, de 1977. Em vez de um movimento teleológico do estruturalismo ao "pós-estruturalismo" ou a um trabalho "autorreflexivo", aponto para a continuidade e transfiguração dos conceitos de estrutura e evento nos diferentes livros de Das, como forma de também imaginar movimentos no interior da teoria social mais ampla sem que cada sucessivo "paradigma" tenha que negar dialeticamente seu antecessor. Pergunto ainda o que significa envelhecer ou "amadurecer" no interior de um corpo de trabalho acadêmico, e como podemos considerar que um autor está envelhecendo e rejuvenescendo ao mesmo tempo, se considerarmos que envelhecer no pensamento não é necessariamente apenas uma questão de cronologia ou teleologia.

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**Abstract**

In this essay I try to suggest a non-teleological way of reading the history of anthropology, by placing Veena Das's *Textures of the ordinary* (2020) in relation to her previous books, beginning with *Structure and cognition: aspects of Hindu caste and ritual* (1977). Rather than a teleological movement from structuralism to "post-structuralism" or "self-reflexive" work, I point to the continuation and transfiguration of the concepts of structure and event across Das's different books, as a way of also imagining movements within social theory more broadly, without each successive "paradigm" having to dialectically negate its predecessor. Further, I ask what it means to age or to "mature" within a body of scholarly work, and how we might take an author to be growing simultaneously older and younger, if we take aging in thought not necessarily to be solely a question of chronology or teleology.

**Palavras-chave**

História da antropologia;  
Veena Das;  
tragédia e comédia;  
Cavell;  
estrutura e evento.

**Keywords**

History of anthropology;  
Veena Das;  
tragedy and comedy;  
Cavell;  
Structure and event.