

THE ABYSS

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How might one think limits of one's disciplinary world in a productive way, that is, with a view not to end up with yet another, even if more expansive, disciplinary cogito but rather, if you will, an epistemic abyss that opens to more radical imaginings of what lies ahead? Is there an external to law in legal theory? A space, even if but conceptual, that we might designate as alegal? Or, what's beyond the grasp for social anthropology? A methodological move from humans to things so that one is encouraged to 'think from things' with a potential to transform, in turn, the entire discipline into the new field of 'pragmatology'? Or, can one seize on the long impasse of the so-called empiricist history to suggest, as Saidiya Hartman would have it, the need for critical fabulation?

My work to date, for the most part, intersects these three disciplines and so my provocation today is limited to them, although one can of course imagine interrogating just about any cognate socio-humanistic 'science' in this mode of critique. At issue is not an exercise in interdisciplinarity, so that where one disciplinary end is found one moves, methodologically, on to another, so as to create a space where disciplines help each other survive. I propose, rather, to pry open the unknowable amidst each separate disciplinary episteme and thus lay bare its existential crisis. And if, perchance, a discipline cannot survive this operation—so be it. Perhaps, after all, its death has been long overdue.

Let me furnish this proposal with three scenes from my recent and current research.

Scene one. We are in Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan and we move through a discursive maze of meanings and beings intersecting at or coalescing around the terms-of-art of our 'science' such as 'gender', 'religion' and 'sexuality'. We are, as it were, productively lost, so as to be found—nay, reborn—into the field, as if there ever were a field. The field, well, it is diverse. So many expressions, we note, of gender-variance, of sexual plurality, of syncretic practices within and between religions. Dividualities, in a Stratherian sense, both human and non-human, abound. Listen to Kajol: 'Here in Pakistan, we say *khwajasara*. It's a more respectful term than the others. We become *khwajasara* when a spirit, called *murid*, enters us'. She touches her chest and smiles placidly. 'Once *murid* is within oneself, one feels very special about oneself and then one can consider oneself *khwajasara*'. Kajol lives with other *khwajasara* in Lahore's inner city slums. There is a canal that separates the urban poor from those who are better off. On the other side lives Jamila, a community leader. 'Somebody will always ask that class-related question', she says, 'for which I don't have an answer: "Why don't we work with *those* kinds of people? Why don't we go across the canal?" And the answer to this is always: "How do we *do* that?" Because, the thing is, you can walk into the old city and say: "We are here to liberate you". But that's neither an ethical nor a viable option. You have to be aware

that *we* do not *represent* the queers of Pakistan. We just represent the people *who we are*'.

Scene two. We are still in Lahore, in a busy home of a Supreme Court judge who is also an expert on the Punjabi *qisse*, or epic-romances. 'If you meet with any senior citizen here, aged 65 or above', he says, 'they will be able to discuss with you any topic, including law, with references to the leading lights of our tradition. I often converse with one such person. And, when I ask him, how much had he studied, he answers, "I'm illiterate". What he means is that he hasn't had any formal schooling, and yet he has been educated in *these* things and he has a *much* more intelligent look into the issues than our very erudite legal scholars and judges [...]. He knows Waris Shah—pages and pages of Waris Shah—by heart'. The judge has also this much to say about the state of affairs of Pakistani law: 'The formal court mechanism has become very oppressive, exploitative system, used mainly by those who are affluent and influential as a tool to oppress their opponents, who are less privileged, less affluent, less moneyed. It's very, very pernicious system [...]. I would say, *it needs to be abolished*. It is that pernicious; it is that bad.'

Scene three. We are back, somehow, in eighteenth-century Senegambia. We think we stand before a Bamana *jeli*, or griot, who sings the songs of the gender-variant water-spirit, called Faro. Faro, the song suggests, brought order out of the original chaos; created the seven heavens; killed Teliko, the spirit of the hot winds of the desert; and produced the first human beings by impregnating himself and bearing twins. Faro, the *jeli* recounts, also gave the first humans the power of speech. The song further instructs that male and female human reproductive organs are represented by the numbers 3 and 4, respectively. The number 7 is, thus, the perfect number, representing the androgynous unity of the world. That's why, the *jeli* tells us, the male-born Bamana 'wear three rings of copper on the right ear and four on the left'. The *jeli*, themselves, is free from gender and sings in a genderless Mandé language. This *jeli*, however, will soon embark on a life-changing journey through the horrors of the Middle Passage. The *jeli* will emerge eventually on the other side of the Atlantic, in French Louisiana: nameless, voiceless, with a body and tongue gendered against their will. And the archives, as is their custom, will keep their deadly silence.

My methodological and theoretical orientations have always tended towards the epistemological and what I termed, clumsily and not unproblematically, in my last book on those Lahori scenes and subjectivities, as 'vernacular knowledge'. With it, I wanted to displace what, in the description of this panel, has been named as the liberal imaginary. I am, however, interested in the provocation of the ontological—but only, I must say, inasmuch as it interrogates the limits of our discursive senses of being-in-the-world and, concomitantly, as I earlier proposed, the limits of our disciplinary designations.

In anthropology at least, those who subscribe to the so-called 'ontological turn' have indeed proposed that the focus on the ontological does not need to presume any guiding ontology in the background. Rather, so goes the adage, posing the ontological questions is really about probing the discipline's ends, which, in turn, can lead to greater reflexivity and creativity or, alternatively, to the birth of an altogether different area of study, as is the case with 'pragmatology' that would apparently emerge if we were to seriously begin to 'think from things' and not just

‘with them’, as it was earlier proposed. However, whilst intrigued by the ontological, I think one must be cautious with any full ‘turn’ towards it, given its heavy baggage in continental philosophy. And, even if this baggage is somehow displaced by a strictly methodological approach, professing no originatory ontology of its own (or creating one anew in the process), one must be wary of an ‘ontic effect’ such turn might have on any subject of inquiry it seeks to elucidate.

In other words, I do not say that Kajol-cum-*murid* from our first scene is *not* as such, and that my assigning her a multiplicity of categories of personhood will somehow ever do the job, whatever the job is (and, I posit, it never quite is mere ethnographic description), but the moment my story, as that’s what it ultimately is, begins to revolve around the issues of presumed ontological difference, I’ll gradually begin to lose sight of the very worldings that suggest both intersubjective and interobjective messiness of all things in life, and therefore makes multiple lifeworlds possible—for they never quite fully *are*. If this is an ontology of its own, then it is a very loose and largely indeterminate one, perhaps but an ontology in the permanent making and unmaking. And, I dare propose, it works better in challenging the liberal imaginary than an ‘ontological turn’ that, as its proponents have recently suggested, in order not to become a conservative force, needs constant rejuvenation, reflexivity and experimentation *with itself* as well as with that what’s observed ‘in the field’. For, even when one simply cannot cross the epistemic canal, as Jamila couldn’t, and when such inability carries certain ontic consequences (after all, she says, ‘[w]e just represent the people *who we are*’), there is still hope that such crossings will become possible—ethically and otherwise. This hope is rooted not in the force of the liberal imaginary that might eventually conquer all difference, but in the resilience of its many alternatives in Lahore’s plural lifeworlds—a resilience born out of many spillages of both ontic and epistemic nature that may ultimately breach the canal. To account for that breach, though, one might need to abandon the presupposed alterity of the observed, and with it, provincialise the place one comes from, as it were, to ‘observe’.

Observing worlding legalities, even if in the mode of critical legal inquiry, also comes at the cost of reaching the limits of the observable, and with it, the limits of the knowable. It calls for a keen observer, as with our Punjabi verse-loving judge of the Supreme Court of Pakistan, to search for an exit. This exit, however, appears to be already premeditated in legal terms, so that a pernicious legal system can only be displaced with another, even if that other system is more earthly and poetic and, one would hope, more just. But, what if the alternative that has just emerged in front of his eyes, with his elderly companion holding firmly onto the vernacular knowledge of the past, is about values, perhaps, but ultimately not legal at all? Can there be an outside of law for a trained legal seeker? Could we call it, if we must, a legality?

What I think is gained by displacing legality from the immediate horizon of a legal theorist is precisely an ability to challenge the liberal imperative to seek, and therefore find, only certain types of normativity and order in the many worlds it roams in. An outside provides for the way to be otherwise, to think from an otherwise, but not so as to reassert an ontic difference *as such*. Spillages, linkages and altogether messy worldings are still possible. And can be a matter of concern for legal scholars. To redeploy law everywhere, even if only conceptually, means,

ultimately, to reassert its epistemic force, and with it, its claim for an ontic primacy, which in turn makes people like our Lahori judge pretty desperate in the end.

Whilst attention to the ontological may be helpful inasmuch as it poses anew the question of the disciplinary limit, including the very limitations of such an attempt, it does not seem to be able to provide for an *interruption* in the epistemic hierarchies implicit in the social sciences and humanities in and of the global north. And such hierarchies are perhaps nowhere so plain as in the domain of history, which keep the gender-variant Senegambian *jeli* so firmly out of sight, so far behind the carefully arranged layers of an archival order. What this order preserves is, of course, not just the liberal imaginary but also what counts as both epistemically and ontically possible. Still, here and there, sometimes, a modest insurrectionary fragment survives and comes forth. With it, the shadow of the *jeli* makes brief appearance. The archive cannot be taken as it is. It has to be interrupted.

Interruption is not just a wilful act of the researcher to break away from the silences of what's archived as evidence, or what counts as evidence, in our 'research-worlds'. Nor is it just a challenge posed in working with the absences produced by the logics of the colonial archivist and the historians who followed in their footsteps. The eighteenth-century Senegambian *jeli* was, in many ways, a living interruption to the imperial orders of human personhood, an interruption whose presence revealed certain less-obvious inconsistencies in those orders. So, the *jeli*'s name just *needed* to be forgotten, their voice muted, their body and tongue gendered differently. What's needed now, then, in order to turn the tables, is an archaeology of interruption, an ecology of insurrection; a history not just from below but beyond, a history turn on itself.

In Saidiya Hartman's vocabulary, this act is called critical fabulation and it stands for making productive sense of the gaps and silences in the archive of trans-Atlantic slavery that absent the voices of the enslaved, including through the use of fictional narrative. I personally do not think that interruption need to include fictionalisation; rather, the very logic of what counts as historical and what as fictional, what writes itself into the past, over and over again, in order to write others firmly outside of it—the logic of the imperial and its corresponding personhoods—needs to be interrupted and inverted.

It is in this sense, then, that one could probe the limits of the disciplinary, and with it, the limits of what counts as both epistemically and ontically possible. An outside to our research-worlds might signal a wonderful beginning of many hitherto hidden worldings. Or it might just mean an end. If the latter be case, I don't think it's worth preserving a discipline at any cost. As we have seen, the unknowable, as it were, indeed sits amidst every disciplinary episteme, and its' probing may reveal an epistemic abyss. But this abyss, I propose, is a good thing. Without it, we might not be able to see beyond the erected Potemkin villages of our social sciences and the humanities.

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