

Why I Write?

In a Climate against Intellectual Dissidence

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Why write? The spaces of intellectual dissidence once provided by universities—promoting disinterested inquiry, encouraging critical analysis, challenging conventional wisdoms—are increasingly controlled, if not squeezed out. A lethal mix of neoliberalism, authoritarianism, and right-wing populism is unfolding in different combinations around the world, and one of its key targets of attack is intellectual freedom. It is pressing for academics as writers to ask, What is our purpose? Who is our reader? How do we navigate the tensions between the constraints of academic evaluation criteria and the compulsions of writing for wider publics, scholarly fidelity and activist commitments, writing as scholars and producing journalism or fiction? This article reflects on these questions through the writing of the book *Nightmarch*, an anthropologist's account of the spread of the Naxalites, a Marx-, Lenin-, and Mao-inspired guerrilla struggle among Indigenous people in the heart of India. The backdrop is the rise of neoliberal audit cultures in UK universities sapping writing of its vitality and Hindu nationalism in India clamping down fiercely on debate, deliberation, and critique, with human rights activists and intellectuals imprisoned as alleged Maoists or “urban Naxals.” The overall aim of this essay is to contribute to opening the space for intellectual dissidence and ignite scholarly relevance beyond academia.

The Dissidence of Intellect

In many parts of the world, the spaces of intellectual dissidence once provided by universities—promoting disinterested inquiry, encouraging critical analysis, challenging conventional wisdoms—seem ever more controlled, if not squeezed out or shut down entirely. The pressures come in different forms in different places—from the neoliberal treatment of universities as corporations to more explicitly political assaults under authoritarian regimes promoting right-wing populism. In this climate of attack on the dissidence of our intellect, it seems ever more important for scholars to ask these questions: Why do I write? What is our purpose? Who is our reader? How do we navigate the different tensions we face—the constraints of academic evaluation criteria versus the compulsions of writing for wider publics, scholarly fidelity versus activist commitments, writing as anthropologists versus producing journalism or fiction? These are all issues we do not talk about enough, but they are urgent for anthropology and its future. Emerging as field notes and footnotes from the underground, this piece has one main agenda. It is to honor the dissidence of our intellect, create space for its development in our writing, and give power to its possibilities.

Over the past decade, there were a lot of difficult decisions to make. Many diverging roads. Some trails paved. Others grown over. Which one to take? Countless sleepless nights. Much deep thinking. On the brink of an abyss. No matter how far I looked before I walked and the intent of the steps I took, new obstacles were unveiled at every bend. Unforeseen dilemmas. Unresolved

questions. *Nightmarch: Among India's Revolutionary Guerrillas* was drawn, remapped, and eventually penned.

I remain doubtful about the paths I picked, haunted by the risks taken, and sometimes paralyzed by the potential consequences. Acutely aware that what may appear as the “end” is in fact only a “new beginning.” My angst no doubt emerges from my specific context. I lived as an anthropologist in the Adivasi tribal forests of eastern India at the peak of state-led counter-insurgency operations amid the spread of the Naxalites or Maoists, a 50-year-old Marx-, Lenin-, and Mao-inspired armed revolutionary struggle. Nevertheless, the making of *Nightmarch* raised some fundamental general issues about writing as an anthropologist in this moment in time.

I owe the title of this article to George Orwell's (1946) famous essay “Why I Write.” There, Orwell interrogated the various motivations for writing and set his agenda to make political writing into an art. It was penned in the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War, against a backdrop of totalitarianism; Orwell explained that every line he had written since 1936 was against totalitarianism and for democratic socialism. In fact, he said, “Everyone writes of them in one guise or another. It is simply a question of which side one takes and what approach one follows. . . . The more one is conscious of one's political bias, the more chance one has of acting politically without sacrificing one's aesthetic and intellectual activity” (Orwell 1946). My and our context is in many ways quite different from that of Orwell. Yet against the backdrop of the curtailment of academic freedoms that I explore in this essay, it seems more important than ever to ask ourselves Orwell's question “why I write.”

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Let me begin by reflecting on the university context in which we write. Controlling knowledge production is crucial to the ever-expanding state-corporation nexus widening socioeconomic inequalities. Universities, as centers of knowledge production, were always tools of the state and corporations. However, since the 1950s, at least in Britain, there was also an ideal that the university was a public good. That it was, as Stefan Collini (2016) argued, “a partly protected space in which the search for deeper and wider understanding takes precedence over all more immediate goals.” As centers of disinterested inquiry, pursuing questions removed from immediate or utilitarian concerns, promoting critical analysis, overturning conventional wisdoms, universities have protected and nurtured dissidence and been the home of intellectual dissidents.

In evoking dissidence, I am reminded of its Latin roots in *dissidēre* (to sit apart). The dissident intellectual is thus the critically minded scholar who is willing to sit apart from and thereby challenge the prevailing value systems, the structures of power, and the political economy they justify through careful research and writing and their dissemination. As my reflections will show, this sitting apart may be in opposition to a neoliberal managerialism filtering down to us, it may be against a rising authoritarianism, but it may also be sitting apart from the counterpropaganda efforts of leftist revolutionary guerrillas.

I start with the Gramscian position that for structural transformation toward a more equal and just society, alongside challenges to relations of production, ideological change is crucial. The inequalities surrounding us are maintained not only through coercive domination but also by ideological control in what becomes accepted as “common sense,” forming what Gramsci called “hegemony.” Countering this hegemony and advancing alternatives to the norm are necessary. It must happen across society, with the development of “organic intellectuals” (Gramsci 1971), but the autonomy of ideological thought in universities is vital. This is because, although all humans are potentially intellectuals—whether they use thumb impressions or articulate with pen and ink—not all have that function in society. By default of our position within the university, academics have been given, have chosen, or have taken the role of intellectuals. Most of the time, university academics are under pressure to buttress the hegemony of dominant powers. Against these forces lies the role of the dissidence of our intellect.

The need to speak truth to power because of our privileged position in society was perhaps most clearly articulated by Noam Chomsky (1967) in his famous essay “The Responsibility of Intellectuals.” Chomsky (1967) argued that it is intellectuals in universities who have the leisure and time, the political liberty, the facilities, and the training to explore hidden truths and express opinions about injustice without fear of persecution. Five decades later, Neil Smith and Amahl Smith (2019) revisited Chomsky’s essay to point out that his call remains as relevant as ever.¹

1. Although the number of people employed in universities has grown, certainly in the United Kingdom, Smith and Smith (2019) say that only a

The threat to academic freedom has evolved in varied forms in different places. In the United Kingdom, the context in which I work, austerity narratives have enabled cuts to core funding, with disciplines promoting critical thinking (the humanities and social sciences) suffering the most; increased dependency on student fees; and pervasive marketization (Collini 2016).² The ethos of business has infiltrated across university governing boards, job contracts, and the ranking of institutions and individuals against one another to determine funding (cf. Smith and Smith 2019). “Audit cultures” (Strathern 2000) have expanded from finance and accounting in a “new managerialism” that is seeping into the heart of everyday practice so that we are forced to monitor one another and ourselves. Becoming a “political technology of the self” (Shore and White 2000), audit cultures contribute to the government’s mode of social order, an arm of neoliberal governance imposed through the university in which “challenging the terms of reference is not an option” (62). Moreover, made too busy, “answering emails and filling out the latest online form demanded of us by our university,” we are left with “no time to fulfil our role as critic and conscience of society” (Shore 2018). Mind numbing is the overall effect, if not the intention.

This managerialism crushing academic freedom in the United Kingdom is elsewhere combined with an attack on intellectual dissidence that is more explicitly political. A lethal mix of neoliberalism, authoritarianism, and right-wing populism is unfolding in varying combinations and for various reasons around the world, and one of its key targets of attack is intellectual freedom.³ There are plenty of examples. The expulsion of Central European University out of Budapest and the attack on the Hungarian Academy of Sciences by the right wing are the tip of the iceberg of the curtailment of academic freedoms in Hungary.⁴ In Turkey in recent years, thousands of academics have been fired, hundreds more have been persecuted and imprisoned, and multiple universities have closed (see Özdemir and Özyürek 2019). In Brazil, Bolsonaro’s planned cuts to universities, in particular to

minority engage in critical analysis that challenges the establishment; most serve external power.

2. Stefan Collini (2016) says that if “prosperity” has become the overriding value of market democracies, universities are being repurposed as “engines of growth,” with buyers and sellers. Students, once considered by right-wing governments to be “disruptors of society,” “sponging from it,” are now positioned as “customers and consumers,” seeking “value for money.” Academics are to become mere producers or providers who, if not kept under check, will threaten “consumer interest.” Now ironically demonized in the role of professional-class spongers formerly assigned to students (Collini 2016), academics are under constant assessment and target control. In the United Kingdom, the Research Excellence Framework (REF) is being married to the Teaching Excellence Framework.

3. This is of course not to say that left-wing populism is not as dangerous; history has shown only too well how the intentions of Communism can end up looking like fascism.

4. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/amid-illiberal-revolution-in-hungary-a-university-with-us-roots-fights-to-stay/2018/09/03/7061771c-a547-11e8-a656-943eefab5daf_story.html.

sociology and philosophy, which are seen as undermining traditional moral and political values, have met fierce resistance. Then there is India, the searing context in which my reflections on “why I write” emerge. There, neoliberal reforms join hands with a right-wing populism from Hindu nationalists—Hindutva forces, as they are known—to clamp down fiercely on debate, deliberation, and critique. Books have been pulped. Jobs have been lost. Intellectuals have been targeted in violent, sometimes fatal attacks, often as alleged Maoists. Some say that this persecution takes the US McCarthy witch hunts to a new level, and there are significant parallels between how Senator McCarthy silenced independent voices as Communists in the United States in the 1950s and the way in which India’s human rights activists, intellectuals, and public critiques are silenced as Maoists today. This direct repression of our colleagues elsewhere makes it ever more necessary to create the spaces for dissidence where we can. But often the pressures are to do exactly the opposite.

Reflecting how neoliberalism materializes itself, elite universities in the West are today encouraging the growth of regional centers—centers of African studies, centers of Middle Eastern studies, and centers of South Asian studies—to attract endowments from wealthy private donors in a context where government funding has been cut. They build on a shady global past when regional studies centers were supported by Cold War considerations—the need for the United States, in particular, to contain Third World revolutions and the spread of Communism.⁵ No doubt there are differences among countries and even within countries depending on the nature of the funding ties pursued, but the repression of intellectual dissidence in faraway places can seep through the gaps beneath our doors because of these wider geopolitical interdependencies. Some regional centers are under some pressure to develop diplomatic ties, often with repressive governments, marrying neoliberalism with neoconservatism. Then there is the need to pander to the egos of potential funders in the hope of swapping wealth for status through the endowment of a named university center or chair, when in fact they may be the sources of the very inequalities and violence we ought to write against. All kinds of compromises to our dissidence are dangerously close.⁶ What questions

will be raised, what subjects will be highlighted, and what approaches and answers will be left out?⁷ Who will be our guests; who will be sidelined, ignored? Will we be there for our fellow intellectuals in those regions when their universities are being destroyed, their homes are raided, and they are incarcerated?

For anthropology, the managerial expansion and professionalization of academic life are potentially crippling. Notwithstanding certain blips in our history—let us not forget our role in colonialism, as a handmaid of empire, or in assisting army efforts in Vietnam or Afghanistan (Asad 1973; Price 1998)—anthropology (i.e., sociocultural anthropology) is politically progressive and has the potential to be quite radical. The long duration and holism of the participant observation involved in ethnography are a potentially revolutionary praxis (Shah 2019), for they force us to question our theoretical presuppositions about the world and produce knowledge that is new, was confined to the margins, or was silenced (Shah 2019). Part of this radical understanding comes from ethnography’s inherently democratic approach; we not only center people and worlds that are otherwise hidden from dominant analyses but also explore the interdependency of all domains of life—kinship, politics, economics, religion—as holistically as we can and how they change (or do not) over time. In taking seriously the lives of others, exploring different spheres of life together, ethnography enables us to understand the relationships between history, ideology, and action in ways that we could not have foreseen, and it is therefore crucial to both understanding why things remain the same and thinking about how dominant powers and authority can be challenged (Shah 2019). Of course, not many of us take up such a challenge, but intellectual dissidence is part of the architecture of anthropology.

In the 1960s and 1970s, with widespread insurrections against colonial regimes, Gavin Smith (2014a, 2014b) argued that, in anthropology and history, dissident intellectuals not only shaped entire disciplines but also made intellectual contributions to popular struggles in direct ways. Think of Eric Wolf (1969), Peter Worsley (1957), Sidney Mintz (1974), and Eric Hobsbawm (1959). Indeed, Kathleen Gough (1968) called for “new proposals for anthropology” that studied Western imperialism and asked new comparative questions with a direct impact on addressing inequality and resistance against it.⁸

5. No doubt the histories of centers of South Asia studies vary among places and affect the different pressures they face. Here, I provide only a broad-brushed direction of change that emerges mainly from the UK context. I believe that it has wider relevance, including in the United States. Dirks (2012) has a less acerbic reading of the transformation of South Asia studies in the United States. It is true that one can use the contradictions of geopolitical interests to pursue work that is progressive. I am reminded of the economist Daniel Thorner, who was hired by William Norman Brown (founder of the University of Pennsylvania’s Department of South Asia Studies) during the Cold War expansion to give South Asian expertise for military and strategic purposes (Dirks 2015) but used his position to further debates in Marxism on the agrarian transition, agricultural cooperatives, and land and labor in India. He was, however, later fired from Penn as part of the McCarthy era’s Red Scare (Dirks 2015).

6. What has been called the London School of Economics (LSE) Gaddafi scandal, over which the then LSE director, Howard Davies, resigned, is a case

in point. The upper echelons of the LSE were accused of accepting several million pounds from the Gaddafi regime to train civil servants and professionals, which was seen as part of a deal to sanitize Gaddafi’s reputation in the West. All this was after the LSE had awarded Gaddafi’s son a PhD, which was later said to have been plagiarized. This compromise hit the public limelight; many others do not.

7. To say nothing is as significant as to say something, as Gerald Berreman (1968:392) put it well.

8. When the president-elect of the American Association of Anthropologists (AAA) unsuccessfully tried to challenge David Aberle and Kathleen Gough’s proposal that the AAA should condemn the US role in the war in Vietnam, saying that it did not “advance the science of anthropology,” Berreman wrote in Gough’s defense. He said, “The dogma that public issues

Targeted in the 1960s by the FBI for her support of Cuba and her work against the Vietnam War, Gough's flag has been carried on within the discipline, even if by a minority. But in our current era of neoliberal reforms, the spaces of dissidence that universities provide are ever more squeezed out. This makes it all the more necessary for us to fight back.

I focus here on writing, writing where we seek to be heard and that appears as books on shelves, as one of our most crucial weapons in the battle for dissidence. Writing as opposed to research, not because we can separate the two but because it is in writing that our investigations get translated into a language and form that others can access and use. In writing we both work out our analyses and communicate our findings; our research gains significance for others. By no means undermining the importance of teaching or research itself, writing is arguably one of the most important aspects of what we do as academics and hence is one of the most significant spaces of the dissidence of our intellect.

Yet rarely do we teach about writing or consciously think about its consequences, and we are also not encouraged to do so. Instead, some crude evaluation criteria (e.g., the REF or promotions rankings; see Borofsky and De Lauri 2019) are used to patrol our writing. In the United Kingdom, in our work allocations, writing is subsumed into the "research" part of the trio "teaching, admin, and research," and funding bodies like the UK Economic and Social Research Council no longer fund the writing process. A kind of scholarly enclosure has advanced as academics are encouraged to write for one another and not the general reader and address whatever conversation seems to be in vogue in a particular moment, and that becomes further validated through the inward-looking practices of recognition, citation, and promotion that we perpetuate. Our writing is often sapped of its vitality, a vigor that is critical to upholding anthropology's unique analytical capacity, its potential relevance beyond the discipline and beyond the academy.

Indeed, university anthropologists today are rarely public intellectuals; these spaces are claimed mainly by people outside the academy (Fassin 2017). Of course, there are many factors to consider, such as the fact that certain national traditions may have more room for university-based public intellectuals than others (e.g., France over England). Or that there simply is not a public that wants to know about the world beyond their doorstep (a common complaint from editors about the "US public"). Notwithstanding these differences, the more general contemporary direction of introversion in our writing is a great loss in the very moment when repressive politics are flourishing across a range of national contexts. As I will show at the end, anthropologists are fighting back, geared to reopening the spaces for

intellectual dissidence. It is time to join hands to ask ourselves some burning questions.

Why I Write

Why write? What is at stake? Are we aware of it? Who is our audience? What makes us tear up our pages and rebuild? Why, if at all, does it matter that we are writing as scholars? What are the consequences?

There is no blueprint, no model, no prefigured ideal. If I am to talk in the language of the Naxalites with whom I lived, there are no "strategies and tactics." Moreover, my purpose is not to provide answers but to raise the question, draw attention to its importance, signal the need for us to ask it of ourselves. No doubt we will answer it in our own ways. But perhaps some general issues may arise if I share some of my own twists and turns in writing. This is because my last book, *Nightmarch*, taught me that it is time to reclaim the radical insights offered by our ethnographic research, their potential in creating knowledge to challenge hegemony, and think carefully about why we write.

No matter how clear our intent, how carefully thought out our plans, much of what we do is serendipitous. Although my scholarship has always been driven by thinking about various forms of inequality and the struggles against it, my routes were shaped by chance.

In 2002, when toward the end of my doctoral anthropology fieldwork I stumbled on the Marx-, Lenin-, and Mao-inspired Naxalite insurgents spreading in rural India, what I thought then was like the Sicilian mafia, I could never have predicted that they would absorb me for the next two decades. Never have thought that I would live for a year and a half in their guerrilla strongholds in the exact aftermath of the Maoists being declared by the then prime minister as "India's greatest internal security threat" at the peak of counterinsurgency operations to flush them out of the very forests where I was based. I could not have predicted that my research would be forced underground as journalists, human rights activists, and academics were thrown out of the areas where I lived. In my wildest dreams I could not have imagined that I would march for seven nights with a guerrilla platoon, across dusty forest trails and precariously balanced on rice bunds without the light of a torch, and cross 250 km from the state of Bihar to the state of Jharkhand, a journey that would frame my book *Nightmarch*, published eight years later.

Accidental as most of my encounters were, the folks I met along the way challenged, influenced, and changed me forever. So let me introduce you to the people who became the central characters of *Nightmarch*, who, as I will show, helped me challenge conventional wisdoms about insurgent action as I wrote.

Prashant, less than 30 years old, first emerged before me from the forests as a dark, sharp, and cold silhouette with an AK-47. He had learned to read and write in the guerrilla armies and was one of the few youths groomed to be a future

are beyond the interests or competence of those who study and teach about man is myopic and sterile professionalism and a fear of commitment which is both irresponsible and irrelevant" (Berreman 1968:391). More recently, the AAA has not hesitated to put out institutional condemnations—e.g., in relation to the use of anthropologists in the US military's Human Terrain System project.

leader, a fighter who could take forward the military struggle. But I remember him for his open, charming smile framed by floppy brown hair and for mixing salt, sugar, and water to ease my travel sickness. I have flashes of him lying under the shade of a tent, surrounded by books—the romantic poetry of Tagore, *Basic Medicine*, and Gulzar's *Green Poems*.

Gyanji, the soft-spoken, slightly balding guerrilla leader. A high-caste intellectual with an agile mind who had cut off ties with his family to be underground for almost 30 years. But no matter how much he “decasted” and “declassed,” his privileged upbringing remained inscribed on the tender soles of his light-skinned feet. Gyanji's deep immersion in those jungles meant that he could swiftly move from citing Marx, Shelley, or Shaw one minute to giving orders in the rustic, gruff Bhojpuri dialect the next. But we argued over his vision of life underground. Were the Adivasis in any case doomed by development, or should their lifestyles be valued? Was the Naxalite violence necessary, or did it reproduce that of the state? Were their gender policies progressive, or did they treat women as the “second sex”? Gyanji accused me of being mechanical and utopian. I fought back and called him anachronistic. We never ended our quarrels, finished our conversations.

Kohli, the gentle, sensitive 16-year-old Adivasi youth with radiant dark skin and a coy smile whose rifle was nearly as tall as he was and who insisted on carrying my bags when he was my bodyguard. He had run away to live with the guerrillas after a trivial fight with his father about a glass of spilled milk while he was working in his tea shop. The Naxalite zonal commander, Parasji, refused at first to accept him, knowing that Kohli was needed at home. Parasji had become a family friend, Kohli's father once explained. He said that the Naxalites had driven away oppressive forest officers by bombing their rest houses, but it was the small things that counted the most—how the Naxalites spoke to villagers, removed footwear before entering their houses, washed cups and plates after use. They showed humility and respect to those normally treated as savage and barbaric by outsiders. Over time the Naxalites built kinship relations in the villages, and so Kohli moved, as Adivasi youths so often did, in and out of the guerrilla armies as though he were visiting an uncle or aunt.

Vikas, the Adivasi platoon commander, whom I first met when I delivered a plate of dinner to his platoon when one night they turned up in the hamlet where I lived. Noticing that I was not local, he roughly interrogated me, told me about the outsiders who had disappeared in those forests, killed as spies and police informers. And although he later tried to charm me, I was left with the bitter taste of our first meeting. Like Kohli, Vikas had also once run away from home to live with the guerrillas, but by the time I met him, Gyanji thought that he was with the Naxalites because he was “earning” pocketing away money for the common needs of the movement for private consumption, and Gyanji called him a “Frankenstein's monster.”

Somwari, the Adivasi woman whom I lived with, who cared for and joked with me daily, whom I called my sister. She taught me not only to appreciate the egalitarian gender relations among

Adivasis through her own self-confidence, grace, and autonomy but also how to carry firewood on my head, make leaf cups, distill wine from the mahua flower, and brew *hadia* rice beer to enjoy with friends and family. She was fiercely critical of the Naxalites, especially after her mahua wine and *hadia* rice beer pots were smashed by the Maoist Women's Liberation Front (see fig. 1) in a top-down attempt to liberate Adivasi women from what was assumed to be their oppression by their men. Nevertheless, she accompanied me to the rebel celebration of International Women's Day in the forests. Although Somwari was afraid of the possibility of her own children joining the Naxalites, she turned to them to prevent her husband's ex-wife from filing cases against her family. On my final journey out of those guerrilla strongholds, it was Somwari who helped me wrap my sari and dressed me as a local to ward off attention from the security forces who would stop the public Jeep I boarded and who shared tears with me as I left for England.

Slow Writing

On my return to London, I wanted to write a book as quickly as possible. The shadow of terror darkened as the government tightened its noose. The military might of the Indian state marched its way right into the forests to occupy the guerrilla strongholds.⁹ Human rights activists said that behind the state's desire to destroy the Naxalites and “civilize” the Adivasis was the aim of clearing the ground, a slow purging of the people to access the mineral wealth beneath the land. *Terror Untold* was the book's provisional title. Its purpose, given the horrors of state repression in the forests, was to humanize the Naxalites, show that their fight was legitimate. It would have been the kind of “militant anthropology” (Scheper-Hughes 1995) that some have advocated for. But deep within me, I knew that I was being driven by a counterpropaganda agenda that would produce quick-fix representations of the people I had met.

In fact, the rapidly emerging writings on the Naxalites were divided one way into those that radically opposed them and the other into those that tried to counter that position, creating polarized views. As commonly happens to such movements in other parts of the world, Adivasis were shown to join the rebels because they were forced to, because they gained utilitarian benefits, or because the insurgents addressed their grievances. The reality, I knew, was more complex. A hastily written book would only have added to the binary of condemnation and romanticization. It would have curtailed my ability to reach a deeper critical analysis of the experiences, visions, and actions of the people whose lives I had shared, to show the nuances and the

9. When I lived in those hills, the security forces climbed up only every three weeks or so. A long line of battleships would be followed by at least 500 armed men, who came on foot to avoid being blown up by the manually triggered land mines laid by the Naxalites. The security forces rarely dared to stay more than a day or two. But by the time *Nightmarch* was published, children went to school against the high fences of a permanent barracks and its machine gun outposts.



Figure 1. Maoist Women's Liberation Front in Jharkhand posing for a photo I took in 2010. It became the cover image for *Nightmarch*.

contradictions beyond the models of insurgent action available. I had to maintain a democratic commitment to the truth in a holistic sense, as exposed by the academic rigor of the research, a commitment that I knew could challenge even those I morally felt I should explicitly form alliances with (Shah 2017).

Moreover, slow writing was important. I was haunted by questions I did not have immediate answers to but that in the end were central to the analyses revealed in *Nightmarch*. Did it matter that Gyanji's first quest for equality and freedom was meditating for Nirvana on the banks of the Ganges? That before he took up arms, he could not step on a line of ants without chanting mantras? That youths like Prashant were rare? That the year before Kohli joined the Naxal armies, he ran away from home to work in faraway brick factories for a few months? Did it matter that Vikas was getting fat and looked more like the well-to-do higher-caste men than tribal youths like Kohli? Would Kohli become like Vikas? Did Somwari need the Russian revolutionary Clara Zetkin to liberate her?

I buried my head to work out the answers. I tried to make sense of what I had observed and experienced. I churned out one academic analysis after another. "Religion and the Secular Left." "The Agrarian Question in a Maoist Guerrilla Zone." "The Intimacy of Insurgency." "Class Struggle, the Maoists and the Indigenous Question in Nepal and India." "The Muck of the Past."¹⁰ I was left with more questions than answers.

10. Ismail and Shah (2015) and Shah (2013a, 2013b, 2014a, 2014b) give a flavor of some of the academic articles I wrote.

Slowly, more news of them trickled in. One day in 2013, Prashant appeared before me as a photograph on the web. One of several half-dressed, mutilated, uniformed guerrilla bodies thrown into a trailer. He had been killed with 10 other Maoists in a forest encounter along the same route that I had walked with the guerrilla platoon three years before. Gyanji also came as a news flash on my screen. His eyes blindfolded by a black bandanna, arms held by policemen, wrists handcuffed, and a small pistol before him. "Dreaded Terrorist Caught." I learned that Vikas had indeed turned on the Naxalites. He left with seven young men and eight of the best rifles to create a gang to kill Gyanji. But he was himself killed by the guerrillas. Kohli returned to the village but only to disappear again. Somwari spent three months in prison with her three-year-old daughter and converted to a fast-spreading Hindu religious sect.

Even as they were killed, were incarcerated, or disappeared, they followed me everywhere. Cycling along Essex Road, down Rosebery Avenue, and into High Holborn, I found Kohli calling out, Gyanji questioning me, Prashant chattering away, and Somwari joking. Over the years, they helped me analyze, argue, and reveal what I had experienced. To explain why people joined the revolutionaries, the theories of greed, grievance, or coercion were all limiting. Far more important was the emotional intimacy nurtured between the guerrillas and the Adivasis based on the egalitarian aspirations of the Naxalites, which led them to treat others with respect and dignity. The resulting kinship relations produced between the guerrilla armies and the Adivasi villages were both the strength of such movements and

also their Achilles heel, as the same battles and tensions within families cropped up in the guerrilla armies. Despite the differences between the renouncer and the revolutionary—the former seeks personal emancipation, and the latter works for communal freedom—there were significant continuities between Communist revolutionaries and the long history of renunciation and sacrifice for liberation in India. The Naxalites held on to an outdated economic analysis of the country—as semifeudal and semicolonial—as though it were a religious text, a dogma. This analysis disabled them from fully addressing major issues stemming from the wide reach of capitalism across the country, including within their guerrilla armies, corrupting them from within. It also disabled them from taking seriously the egalitarian values—for instance, gender equality—that already existed among the Adivasis, leading to a decline of those values. And when one takes up arms to fight for social change, it is easy to reproduce the violence of the oppressor.

As state repression increased, I realized that I could not let the stories of the people I met and these unexpected insights that I discovered through them to be confined to the ivory towers of the university.¹¹ I had to touch the hearts of people who read the book—as many as possible—in the way that the people I had met had touched mine. I knew I had to try to reach as wide an audience as I could but without simplifying the analyses or dumbing down this scholarship.

This meant writing a kind of book very different from the dry academic text that I had been trained to produce and that was valued by the institutional context of anthropology around me. I foolishly talked about the forthcoming book as creative and experimental in my yearly review back at my university. I was warned against it. A straightforward academic monograph was the best for me. Any deviation from the prevailing norms was risky; the institution would not know what to do with such a book in promotions and REF panels. Creating, experimenting had somehow become “anti-intellectual.” I stopped talking about the book.

Curtailment of Intellectual Freedom in India

Our writing, though, should be shaped not just by the university environment in which we work but also by the wider historical and political context in which we live. For me, the increasing curtailment of intellectual freedom in India itself became very important. Let me tell you about some of what happened as the direction of these infringements affected my writing process.

The attack on intellectual freedom had begun while I was still doing fieldwork. First targeted were those people entering the guerrilla strongholds to cover the atrocities that were taking place there—journalists, scholars, and human rights activists

(fig. 2). They were prevented from going into the forests unless they had the “protection” of the police forces, they were chased out by state-sponsored vigilante groups, or they had cases filed against them to warn them to lay off. This curtailment rapidly turned into a wider attack on critical intellectuals, journalists, and higher education in general.

Some of my colleagues were arrested.¹² The crime that allegedly united them all was that they were “antinational,” more specifically that they had Maoist links or were urban Naxals. This label enabled the filing of legal charges of sedition and terrorism against them and detention in conditions under which bail was nearly impossible.¹³ Trials lasted years, with years of incarceration, even if, finally, there was an acquittal. Human Rights Watch (2016) declared that in India the legal process is the punishment. The charges were a way of striking terror in anyone who dared to speak out for social justice, a means to silence dissent.¹⁴

Hundreds of people were affected, but I would like to mention just a few. G. N. Saibaba, assistant professor of English at Delhi University—whom I last saw in 2012 at Goldsmiths, University of London, being carried out of his wheelchair into a car after giving a seminar on English literary culture in India—was incarcerated in 2014. In June 2018, Shoma Sen, head of Nagpur University’s English department—whom I met three years before on her way to a conference on Dalit literature at the University of East Anglia—was arrested alongside the poet Sudhir Dhawale, the advocate Surendra Gadling, the forest rights activist Mahesh Raut, and the activist Rona Wilson. Two months later,

12. Others were killed. M. M. Kalburgi, a scholar of Vachan literature, once vice chancellor of Hampi’s Kannada University, was killed in 2015. He was followed by Gauri Lankesh, editor of a Kannada weekly and a journalist turned activist, who was shot in 2017. They were both murdered by Hindu goons in a state where in July 2018 a member of the Legislative Assembly (from the ruling Hindu right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party) felt that he could say in public that if he were home minister, he would order the police “to shoot intellectuals.”

13. This is under sect. 124A of the Indian Penal Code, a sedition law introduced in the colonial era and used against those fighting for Indian independence, including Gandhi. Also used was the dreaded Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act.

14. To be sure, allegations of being antinational are as old as the independent Indian state. The Naxalite label also has a long history going back to the late 1960s. Its resurgence—as “Maoist”—to suppress those who are human rights workers predates the present government. In 2010, e.g., Binayak Sen, the vice president of the People’s Union for Civil Liberties and also a pediatrician and public health specialist, and Ajay T. G., a long-term research assistant and collaborator of anthropologist Jonathan Parry and a filmmaker, were targeted for allegedly helping Maoists and for sedition. Both were jailed, and although they are now out on bail (largely because of a major campaign nationally and internationally—one was signed by 22 Nobel laureates), the cases are ongoing. See Parry (2015) for a sensitive, thoughtful, and revealing piece on incarceration and its aftermath that covers in detail Ajay’s story but also that of Binayak Sen, with an analysis of regional class politics against the backdrop of the tricky boundaries between anthropology and activism, participation and observation.

11. One estimate has it that an average paper in a peer-reviewed journal is read completely by no more than 10 people (<https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/prof-no-one-is-reading-you>).



Figure 2. Intellectuals and human rights activists arrested in India as alleged Maoists or “urban Naxals” from June 2018 to April 2020 in the Bhima Koregaon case. *Top left to right*, Mahesh Raut, Surendra Gadling, Vernon Gonsalves, and Gautam Navlakha. *Bottom left to right*, Arun Ferreira, Shoma Sen, Rona Wislon, Sudhir Dhawale, Sudha Bharadwaj, Varavara Rao, and Anand Teltumbde. After April 2020, and before this article went to press, there were five further arrests in the Bhima Koregaon case: the Jesuit priest Father Stan Swamy; Hany Babu, an associate professor of English at Delhi University; and the three cultural artists of the Kabir Kala March, Jyoti Jagtap, Sagar Gorkhe, and Ramesh Gaichor. Image credit: anonymous.

several intellectuals and activists were targeted simultaneously across the country in Hyderabad, Mumbai, Delhi, and Ranchi. Five were arrested. There was Gautam Navlakha, the secretary of People’s Union for Democratic Rights and a scholar, who was last in the United Kingdom in 2010 for a conference I organized on emancipatory politics. And there was Sudha Bharadwaj, who taught law at Jindal University but for decades was also an advocate, union activist, and human rights worker in Chhattisgarh. In 2016 she regretfully declined to deliver the keynote lecture at our conference “Ground Down by Growth,” indicating that there would be problems in getting a passport. And there was also Varavara Rao, the poet, and the human rights activists Arun Ferreira and Vernon Gonsalves. All, except for Navlakha, were thrown into the prison in Pune in August 2018. Others had their houses raided and work seized by the police—including Professor K. Satyanarayana of English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, and Professor Anand Teltumbde of Goa Institute of Management, who were both last in the United Kingdom in 2017 as speakers at our “Ground Down by Growth” conference (Teltumbde was in fact an adviser to our European Research Council on Adivasis and Dalits in the belly of the Indian economic boom). Teltumbde and Navlakha (who had been mainly under house arrest since August 2018) were sent to prison in April 2020 during the COVID-19 lockdowns, when prisons across the world were releasing prisoners. Stan Swamy, an 83-year-old Jesuit priest who had spent the past 30 years fighting for the rights of Indigenous people, was sent to prison in October 2020 despite his severe Parkinson’s disease. No trial was begun for any of these prisoners. Swamy contracted COVID-19 and tragically died in jail nine months later. Many called it a custodial murder.

The arrests of these intellectuals and human rights activists since 2018 became known as the Bhima Koregaon case, as they were initially accused of involvement in Dalit violence against

Hindutva forces in January 2018 during the 200th anniversary celebration of a Dalit army (in collaboration with British forces) defeating an upper-caste regime of the Maratha Empire in the Maharashtrian village of Bhima Koregaon. In a complex twist of events, the Hindutva instigators of the violence, one of whom was initially arrested for inciting the January 2018 violence, were freed on bail. Sixteen intellectuals and human rights activists were charged instead, on flimsy evidence, under draconian anti-terror laws under which bail is nearly impossible, for inciting the violence and even plotting to assassinate the prime minister. It was said that they had Maoist links, were urban Naxals.

This callous attack on individual intellectuals came hand in hand with one on the ideal of the public university itself. The university was once imagined as independent India’s “organ of civilization,” “sanctuary of the inner life of the nation,” where everything would be “brought to the test of reason, venerable theologies, ancient political institutions, time-honoured social arrangements, a thousand things that to a generation ago looked as fixed as the hills” (Government of India 1950:30).¹⁵ Now, the public university has become a site of surveillance, control, and repression.

This anti-intellectual stance was perhaps most evident at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), one of the country’s premier higher learning institutions, renowned for its rich environment of debate and discussion and where I have enjoyed the privilege of holding two visiting fellowships and two research partnerships. JNU was painted by the ruling party, the police, and much of the mainstream media as the hotbed of Maoism, where students were indoctrinated into antinational activities. In 2016, army tanks were requested on campus to “instill” nationalism among the

15. This is from the Radhakrishnan Report, the first report on higher education in independent India.

students.¹⁶ New regimes of surveillance erupted: Daily attendance registers extended to faculty, enforced through disbursement of salary. Leave was granted only at the whims of the vice chancellor, who spearheaded these changes.¹⁷ More subtle attacks on the staff body ensued—promotion of only those who would not challenge the administration's diktats, punishment of those who would (by denying them housing or leave), and control of the selection committees that determined appointments.

All of this escalated so that by the end of 2019, the police themselves either led or were complicit in violence unleashed against dissenting students and staff (figs. 3, 4). A Citizenship Amendment Act had just been passed that, against the spirit of India's constitution, enshrined religious discrimination into law, specifically targeting Muslims. At Jamia Millia Islamia University in Delhi, the police went on a rampage on the university campus; beat students with batons, including attacking those sitting quietly in the library; and blinded others with tear gas. Reports claim that about 40 were detained and more than twice as many were injured.¹⁸ At JNU a few weeks later, a masked mob armed with iron rods, sledgehammers, sticks, and bricks attacked students and staff who were meeting to organize against the increase in student fees. They chanted slogans and called the staff and students antinational and Naxalites, injuring about 40 people. Eyewitnesses accused the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad, the student wing of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)—that is, the voluntary paramilitary organization of Hindutva forces—of having led the attacks and said that the police were intentionally inactive and complicit.¹⁹

The intensifying attacks on JNU represent the epitome of wider changes in higher education, noticed only because of a battle.²⁰ Other transformations silently but steadily and

stealthily swept across the country.²¹ Diversion of funding for the social sciences (the heart of intellectual dissidence) to technical and managerial disciplines (which produce technocrats and those who serve established powers) and the growth of private sector university education provisions undermine the idea of higher education as a public good. Proposals that central universities follow a common admissions procedure and content, which critiques say will diminish creativity, centralize authority, and push for a "saffronization" of the syllabus, uphold a vision of society as found in mythology and religious texts. Leaders of a range of key institutions, from the Indian Council of Historical Research to the Indian Council for Social Science Research (ICSSR), were appointed by the RSS and its affiliate bodies.²²

The overall trajectory was a crushing of the spaces of intellectual freedom in India. Anyone who fought back or spoke out against the repression was increasingly at risk of being targeted, labeled a Maoist, and put in jail. Meanwhile, what was happening in the guerrilla strongholds had already been silenced for the outside world. Many of my friends—those who lived in the jungles and those in the cities who could have brought light to their stories—were incarcerated, if not killed. This put into perspective the insignificance of the institutional closure I felt back in the United Kingdom with the professionalization of academia and heightened my awareness of my privileged position outside India. The responsibility of the uniqueness and significance of the stories I carried weighed ever more heavily. I continued to work clandestinely on the book I felt that I ought to write.

How I Write

How to do it? My inspiration came from Orwell (1946), for whom the initial motivation for writing was to get a hearing because there were lies to expose and facts to draw attention to but also to make that process into an aesthetic experience. I wanted to disclose the best of what anthropology and participant observation had to offer, their democratic potential in showing unexpected insights, telling stories you would not hear otherwise, and exposing hidden processes and the relationships between seemingly disconnected aspects of life. For instance, the emotional intimacies developed between the guerrilla armies and the Adivasis were more important than theories

16. Control of the student body involved dramatically reducing master's of philosophy/PhD intake and entirely undermining the various systems of reservation for marginalized sections of society—both the state-sanctioned reservations and JNU's own system of enrollment weightage, which ensured places for students from rural, underprivileged backgrounds.

17. This was evident when the dean of the School of Arts and Aesthetics won the Infosys Prize for Humanities (an annual Indian award of ₹65 lakh—about £70,000—that honors outstanding scholarly achievement in India) but was not allowed to attend the prize-receiving ceremony (<https://indianexpress.com/article/education/things-at-jnu-bad-professors-whose-leaves-were-rejected-5525052/>).

18. <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/delhi/jamia-library-police-attack-students-recall-6271624/>; <https://thewire.in/government/jamia-police-attack-report>.

19. <https://caravanmagazine.in/education/jnu-abvp-attack-5-january>.

20. Many fought back with hunger strikes, rallies, teach outs, petitions, and opinion pieces in the media, despite the fear of losing their jobs and places (Pathak 2018) and being imprisoned. Members of Parliament voiced their concerns, challenging the "attack on intellect." At stake in the battle for JNU was not just its own heritage or achievements (Nair 2018); it was the idea of the university itself, said Avijit Pathak (2018). What was attacked, Jayati Ghosh (2018) said, was "higher education in general, insofar as it produces informed and questioning citizens." As such, "the struggle for the soul of this university is part of a larger struggle for the soul of the country" (Ghosh 2018).

21. To be sure, years of underinvestment had already turned many smaller regional universities—like Ranchi University in Jharkhand, where I had my first research affiliation—into centers where classes rarely took place, degrees were bought, and embezzlement of money was rife. But recent years have seen changes of a different order.

22. Also impacted were the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, the Indian Institutes of Technology, the central universities, the National Council of Educational Research and Training, and the State Council of Educational Research and Training. Reflecting on the 2017 ICSSR, Chairman Ramachandra Guha, India's most noted historian, said that the appointment provides confirmation that the government has "contempt for thinkers and scholars (as distinct from loyalists and ideologues)."



Figure 3. Photo of student protesters and police complicity in the violence against them taken at Jawaharlal Nehru University on January 5, 2020, by Shahid Tantray for *Caravan*.

of greed, coercion, or grievance in explaining insurgent mobilization. And there were continuities between religious renouncers and Communist revolutionaries. And the revolutionary economic analysis had become like a religious text that, although it may have helped a small elite stay together for years on

end underground, also explained why guerrilla activities were undermined daily.

And I wanted to reveal the beauty of the research by turning its intellectual insights into an art, a form of writing that could be read by any interested person. I thought more and more



Figure 4. Photo of student protesters and police complicity in the violence against them taken at Jawaharlal Nehru University on January 5, 2020, by Shahid Tantray for *Caravan*.

about my potential reader. As Sartre (1947) said in his reflections in “Why Write?,” “There is no art, except for and by others” (43); writing thus implies reading as its dialectical correlative, for the world that is revealed in writing is the joint effort of the author and the reader. I felt what he expressed. To write was to disclose the world—an unjust world—to transcend it and to bring the reader to create in imagination what was disclosed and thus also to be responsible for it, in an imaginary engagement with the action (Sartre 1947:60–61).

And that is how a meandering 250-km night march emerged and unfolded across the book (fig. 5). Apart from helping the reader keep the pages turning while giving a flavor of life underground on the subcontinent, *Nightmarch* was framed as a metaphor for the Naxalite movement itself, my analysis of its spread among the Adivasis, and the limitations and contradictions of its imaginations and actions. It enabled me to introduce the archetypal characters—Prashant, Gyanji, Kohli, Vikas, Somwari—who had come together to take up arms to fight for a more equal and just world but who also fell apart. *Nightmarch* thus represented the hopes and tragedies of the resistance, signaling its different facets, its past, present, and future, highlighting the conflict, contradictions, and tensions of the fight against inequality, oppression, and injustice at the heart of contemporary India.

I had to rework much that I had learned, the habits I was trained into, the traps of mystification common in academic writing. New concerns filled my imagination. Character, dialogue, journey, cliff-hangers, audience, and how to show and not always tell. I learned from writers of fiction—Zola’s *Ger-*

minal, Mistry’s *A Fine Balance*, or Renu’s *Kalankamukti*. Not that I was under any illusion that I had the skills of a literary artist. I also did not want to turn what I wrote into *The Lives of Others* or *A State of Freedom*, as much as I admire Neel Mukherjee. But the boundaries are blurred.

Literature is “often understood to be one of anthropology’s most recurrent and provocative companions in thought” (Brandel 2019). Indeed, Edmund Leach (1989) once said that ethnographers as authors are not concerned with factual truth, that an ethnographic monograph has more in common with a historical novel than with any kind of scientific treatise. Leach’s implication, some have said, was that we are all failed novelists. Speaking about development studies, others claim that fiction can not only be “better” than academic or policy research in representing central issues . . . but they also frequently reach a wider audience and are therefore more influential” (Lewis, Rodgers, and Woolcock 2008:198). It is certainly true, as Lewis Coser once said, “that the creative imagination of the literary artist often has achieved insights into social processes which have remained unexplored in social science” (Lewis, Rodgers, and Woolcock 2008:202).

The line between fact and fiction is a fine one. There are many authors who base their novels on deep research and factual events and many social scientists who use made-up contexts to exemplify their arguments, illustrate their theses. Equally, anthropologists writing novels begin with the discipline’s history. Think of Zora Neale Hurston (1986 [1937]) or Laura Bohannan/Elenore Smith Bowen (1954), for instance. Today, *Anthropology and Humanism* sponsors a fiction competition, and



Figure 5. On the night march from Bihar to Jharkhand in 2010. Photo by the author.

we have a genre of ethnographic novels. But as Kirin Narayan (1999) has put it, although the boundary is productive and has the potential to enhance anthropology's relevance, to do away with a border would be a loss for both fiction and ethnography.

Ultimately, as I thought about *Nightmarch*, the difference between writing a novel and writing ethnography stood out. Discussing the book based on his anthropology PhD in relation to his novels, Amitav Ghosh said, "Nothing in *Antique Land* is invented" (Stankiewicz 2012:536). Ethnographies are always partial, and although we have historically strived to "reach the native's point of view" (Geertz quoted in Narayan 1999:140), we do not just go inside the heads of our informants and make things up, and we do not invent events or scenarios. "Fiction is shameless," said Narayan (1999), "writers have no qualms speaking from within the subjective worlds, thought processes, and emotions of their characters" (140–141). Fiction writers are driven by another set of rules—namely, to tell a convincing story (Wolf 1992). But as anthropologists, we owe it to our readers to represent social reality as we find it, however flawed our perspective, and if we divert from that rule, we indicate that. As put by Didier Fassin (2014), "If the fictional imagination lies in the power to invent a world with its characters, the ethnographic imagination implies the power to make sense of the world that subjects create by relating it to wider structures and events" (55). *Nightmarch* made me realize that the fact that we do not just invent, that our point is to make generalizations and links to larger processes, is powerful, especially politically.²³

Then there is also the difference between anthropological writing and journalism. I was forced to think about this early on, partly because of my compulsion to reach a wider audience, to bring attention to the issues taking place in eastern India because of the international silence around them. My first public output from fieldwork came only a month after my return to London. It was the making and presentation of a program for BBC Radio 4's *Crossing Continents*, a 30-minute radio documentary called "India's Red Belt," produced from recordings I had made in the field. Although it fulfilled my desire to bring light to these issues in the international media, it had none of the sophistication of the analysis at the heart of *Nightmarch*, none of the complexity and nuances that are at stake. It is not just that the BBC would not have waited eight years for me to work it all out; it is also that there was a limit to the contradictions I could present in such a form.

Long-form investigative journalism, though, has much to share with critical public anthropology. The best of it is, at the very least, on par with the best of anthropology. And as Emma Tarlo (2013) says, we can all learn much about the craft of

storytelling from such journalism.²⁴ But thinking about *Nightmarch* in relation to the accounts of journalists who tried to cover the Naxalites in book form—I am reminded of Shubharanshu Choudhary's (2012) *Let's Call Him Vasu* or Rahul Pandita's (2011) *Hello Bastar*, for instance—there are, on the whole, also important differences. They stem from the different temporalities we work under (see Boyer 2010) but also from our differing approaches, the ethical obligations that we develop toward those we lived with, and the freedom we have in our writing. We, as anthropologists, can usually spend more time than journalists in doing the research. Our immersion in the lives of those we study is often deeper, compelling us to act in their favor where we can. Our approach is comprehensively more holistic—covering religion, economics, politics, kinship, aspects of life we could never have imagined would become significant when we began. We are also less target or story oriented in how we conduct our research; in fact, we usually take pride in the fact that we are not driven by a story but work out what the story or stories are only afterward. Moreover, after they conduct research, it is not often that long-form journalists have the luxury to think things through, work out the contradictions and nuances; the circuits of journalism are much faster than those we are faced with. And perhaps, in the pressures that journalists face in making a sharp, tight-knit story that fits the needs of contemporary news cycles, there is also less space for thinking about the products of our writing as artifacts that snake through our material and document the details, nuances, and complexities of life. I continued my meanderings.

The more I wrote, rewrote, and edited, the clearer it was that I was writing against the grain of expectations.²⁵ The pressures start with the birth of a new academic. Jason De León shares,

So before I had tenure you know I very much had to crank out a series of journal articles that will put you to sleep even though they're probably about interesting topics. . . . Nobody ever said to me . . . 'when you write be kind to your reader.' . . . And when I started working, when I had to write a book for promotion, I was like . . . I got to do this thing I've been doing in article form and now I've got to do it for like a hundred thousand words? That sounds very soul crushing.²⁶

Alma Gottlieb's (2016) solution to similar frustrations was to write a popular account of her fieldwork clandestinely with her

23. Of course, all of these freedoms we have in academia are under threat, as Dominic Boyer (2010) points out—with funding cuts, many of us cannot do long-term field research. Especially after the initial doctoral stint, multisited fieldwork has had strengths but also losses, as it has promoted shorter fieldwork in more places rather than longer-term immersion in one community, and there are rising pressures produced by job markets and institutional cultures to publish quickly.

24. Comparing Katherine Boo (2012) and Aman Sethi (2011), the latter of which she characterizes as more anthropological, Tarlo (2013) says that although anthropology can learn more about the craft of storytelling from journalists, it also has important lessons to offer about the nature of evidence, ethnographic authority, knowledge coproduction, ethics, and representation.

25. Algorithms that map the incidence of rainfall onto incidences of Maoist violence to reveal reasons for conflict are increasingly getting the golden stamp over anything the stories of Kohli, Gyanji, or Vikas could reveal, especially in political science.

26. In a conversation with Arielle Milkman on *Anthropod* from the Society of Cultural Anthropology (<https://culanth.org/fieldsights/1629-wrap-on-immigration>).

partner, keeping this “parallel world,” as it was called, entirely separate from her university world. Talented writers among anthropologists have often chosen to keep their writerly writing separate from their scholarly endeavors. As one such writer said to me on the publication of her second book, which her promotion to professor depended on, “You’ll be disappointed, Alpa; I’ve had to squeeze out all the ethnography.”

Opening Up the Spaces of Dissidence

Yet at the same time, anthropology is changing. It is true that we do need Gramsci’s “pessimism of the intellect; optimism of the will.” But there are reasons to be hopeful. In recent times, Ruth Behar (2009) has made the case that ethnography at its best is just another form of creative nonfiction and has called for believing in anthropology as literature. Attention to ethnography as theoretical storytelling is the position Carole McGranahan (2015) claimed for anthropology. Increased attention is being given to thinking about the anthropologist as writer (McGranahan 2020; Wulff 2016) and calling for experimenting in writing as essential to anthropology’s role in the contemporary world (Pandian and McLean 2017).

Change is enabled partly through continuity. Despite the overwhelming insularity of so much of anthropological writing, there have always been those who bucked the trend, tried to reach beyond to a wider audience, and are the main reason why anthropology is known beyond the discipline and its close relatives. As scholars are reminding us today, anthropologists, whether Malinowski, Mead, or Mauss, once wrote things that mattered beyond the academy (Borofsky and De Lauri 2019; Eriksen 2006). Moreover, writerly writing goes back to the history of the discipline. Zora Neale Hurston’s (1990 [1935]) *Mules and Men* and Claude Lévi-Strauss’s (1955) *Tristes tropiques* are cases in point. And throughout anthropology’s history, there have been those who have continued to experiment, either clandestinely or at the risk of their careers. This legacy has kept alive a rich writing history that we can now openly recuperate and celebrate.

Change is also enabled by the fact that serious conversations about writing itself were kept alive in anthropology. James Clifford and George E. Marcus’s (1986) *Writing Culture* was seminal in doing that. Even if concerns about representations took over in its aftermath, sidelining the focus on the major issues of the time (e.g., the question of power, imperialism, or inequality), it nevertheless promoted a recognition of what Danilyn Rutherford (2012) called our “kinky empiricism.” That is, not only the situated nature of our writings but also our methods create obligations that compel us to put ourselves on the line by making truth claims that we know will intervene in the settings and among the people we describe (Rutherford 2012:1548).²⁷ Philippe Bourgois (2002a) explicitly called for an

ethnography that engages theory with politics in a way that is relevant to the people being studied but has remained marginal to the discipline, and he opened by example a path that others can make their own in writing (see, in particular, Bourgois 2002b). And others, such as Renato Rosaldo (1989), dismantled the dry scientific norms of academic anthropology writing and promoted instead an approach that centered narrativity and subjectivity.

And then there are contradictions in the way the pressures from above work that can be used as a force for change. Top university presses are feeling the financial crunch; books need to sell. Editors at these presses are encouraging us to move beyond academic prose in favor of compelling, clear writing (see also Gottlieb 2016). “Scholars must think of themselves as writers and hold themselves to that standard,” says Priya Nelson (2017:364), an editor at Princeton University Press.

Of course, we must be astute about such contradictions, that the current economic-political climate itself may be urging us to “tell a story” and “touch hearts” as part of the affective politics of neoliberalism. Or the search for wider audiences may involve pitching books to commercial presses that, if at all interested in our writing, may require us to comply to the demands of what they think will sell, which may not be what emerges from our research. We must think critically about the conditions under which the genres we pursue are being developed, promoted, and adopted, for it will shape what kinds of stories we tell and how we tell them.

But there are other positive initiatives that perhaps help us move beyond such market demands. In the late 1990s, the University of California Press explicitly launched a series in Public Anthropology, headed by Robert Borofsky, with a book prize to encourage anthropologists to engage with key contemporary issues, snap out of insular, incomprehensible debates that were irrelevant to the lives and struggles of most people, and engage broad publics in their writing. Several years on, this initiative has created a broader space for “public anthropology”: a journal in its name that explicitly solicits debates on how anthropology can concretely contribute to social and political change (Borofsky and De Lauri 2019), centers and institutions of public anthropology, and master’s degrees and university courses in public anthropology.

Mathijs Pelkmans (2013) rightly reminds us to be wary of the fact that some kinds of public anthropology are better than others, and in those questionable circumstances, we would be better off if those anthropologists had no impact at all, had no publicly audible voice. There are of course anthropologists who have had a murky history as public intellectuals, a history

27. Philip Bourgois (2002a) critiqued the effect of *Writing Culture* aptly: “With suspicious predictability, contemporary ethnographers have become

more excited when they write about the meaning-of-meaning-of-what-was-meant, than when they write about confronting power relations in flesh and blood” (419). He said that we often fail to write against the blood, sweat, and tears of everyday life we encounter on the ground. See also Polier and Roseberry (1989); Starn (2012) has a more appreciative take.

we would rather now forget.²⁸ With these caveats, the opening of a space for a public anthropology seems a positive development.

Moreover, those who took the risk to write jargon-free books engaging broad publics are being rewarded. Jason De León's (2015) *The Land of Open Graves* won several prestigious book prizes, including the 2016 Margaret Mead Award and the 2018 J. I. Staley Prize. Alma Gottlieb and Philip Graham (1993) won the Victor Turner Prize for *Parallel Worlds*. And although I disregarded the writing advice I was given at my institution, it is gratifying to see *Nightmarch* acclaimed in the discipline and beyond.²⁹

But above all, change is coming from "below." Undoubtedly, what is happening in the wider world of publishing is beginning to affect the shape of academic writing. Perhaps it is because of the very pressure of decades of professionalism, the knowledge that years of tenure criteria and academic ranking have dumbed potential brilliance down into mediocrity in writing, that we feel the need to push back. Perhaps it is because in this era of rising inequality and authoritarianism, we more than ever feel Orwell's sense of the political and artistic purpose of writing to keep alive the spaces of democracy, the hope of justice, and demands for a more equal world. Perhaps we are empowered by the ability of scholars like David Graeber or Jason De León to have a real impact beyond the academy and to begin reclaiming a more public dissident space for anthropology. What is particularly encouraging is that it is not only those who have the job security to experiment but also younger scholars who are beginning to burst the seams of the academic straitjackets. And finally, the AAA, in an attempt to revise the deficiencies of current promotions and tenure review, has put out new guidelines urging departments and universities to acknowledge public forms of writing and scholarship.³⁰

This collective will across generations will, I hope, be a force for overall change toward giving more room for writing that matters and matters beyond the academy. The point is not simply to "humanize" our interlocutors or to celebrate an aesthetics of narrative arcs, characters, and plots in our writing. It is to reclaim in our writing the political, even revolutionary potential of our experiences in producing knowledge that is new, confined to margins, and silenced and that can grind

against the commonsense perspectives that prop up systems of coercive domination.

Afterlife

Let me make some final reflections. It remains to be seen what—if anything—happens to the stories of Gyanji, Kohli, Vikas, Prashant, Somwari, and others.³¹ Didier Fassin (2015) rightly urges us to be astute about the public afterlife of our books. But giving birth, as I am learning, is also about letting go. As Noam Chomsky (1996) said, separating the role of the writer from those who can do something about the issues they write about, "The responsibility of a writer as a moral agent is to try to bring the truth about matters of human significance to an audience that can do something about them" (88).

Although the Indian government has strangled the Naxalite movement in the forests in recent years, we have also seen resistant upsurges on social media, with people self-claiming #MeTooUrbanNaxal as a way of protesting against the ever-expanding number of scholars and activists attacked and silenced for being Naxalites. It is perhaps somewhat ironic that in India, the country that some call the world's largest democracy, extreme state repression has inadvertently led to the idea of Naxalism or Maoism keeping alive the idea of democracy itself. "Dissent is the safety valve of democracy," a Supreme Court bench declared, trying to (unsuccessfully) intervene to prevent Pune police from sending Gautam Navlakha, Sudha Bharadwaj, Varavara Rao, Arun Ferreira, and Vernon Gonsalves to prison. I would refine that to "dissent is constitutive of democracy." Our role as intellectual dissidents is more important than ever.

We will all have our own approaches to channeling our dissidence. Writing is not the only form. Writing for wider publics is certainly not for everyone or for every instance of our writing. There is also teaching, hosting seminars, participating in discussion groups, signing petitions, marching in rallies, changing the field of scholarship, challenging public policy, using social media, contributing to radio and TV programs, turning our research into another form of art, curating exhibitions and public displays, and making documentaries.³² Some of us may do several of these things at the same time.

I have focused here on our monographs as the most powerful translator of our research. We are inheritors of a unique form of knowledge production with the potential to throw important light on issues of significance to the public good that can challenge conventional wisdoms, reclaim the margins, expand our horizons and actions. Let us not get fooled into channeling the energies of our dissidence toward the orthodoxy of our

28. Pelkmans (2013) usefully makes explicit that he "can only be *enthusiastic* about anthropological public voices when they 1) interrogate dominant power and give voice to the marginalised, 2) argue against fundamentalist and essentialist positions, and 3) highlight complexity and are thereby either relativist or anti-anti-relativist" (398).

29. *Nightmarch* won the 2020 Association for Political and Legal Anthropology Book Prize in Critical Anthropology, was a finalist for the 2019 Orwell Prize and the New India Book Foundation Prize, was long listed for the Tata Literature Live Award, and appeared on 2018 book of the year lists from the *New Statesman* in the United Kingdom and Scroll India.

30. <http://s3.amazonaws.com/rdcms-aaa/files/production/public/AAA%20Guidelines%20TP%20Communicating%20Forms%20of%20Public%20Anthropology.pdf>.

31. All I know right now is that they are circulating beyond the realms I thought I could reach. They are turning up in bookshops in Turin, airports in Delhi and Mumbai, and hidden-away pavement stores on the ghats of Benares and being translated into other languages.

32. See the comprehensive review of "engaged anthropology" by Low and Engle Merry (2010).

discipline, motivated only by journal rankings, criteria of promotion, and REF and driven by professionalism. Let us direct our energies, where we can, to challenge hegemony with our scholarship. Times of repression, oppression, and control can also turn into moments of spectacular, resistant creativity. We are still a privileged minority. We are in a moment now when there is actually a disciplinary call for good writing that matters for humanity as a whole. Let us seize the moment and reshape the future. Our writing can be our weapon.

Acknowledgments

*How long
Can prison walls
And iron bars
Cage the free spirit?
(Rao 2010:102)*

Varavara Rao penned these words from behind prison walls. He was imprisoned again as an alleged Maoist in 2018 alongside the other intellectuals and human rights activists of the Bhima Koregaon case. I dedicate this piece to them and all the other friends, colleagues, and students who are in jail in India, battling serious charges struck against them to cripple their activities but nevertheless still fearlessly fighting for the protection of intellectual freedom.

Had the night march with the Naxalite guerrillas that I recount in the book walked 250 km the other way—north through the agricultural plains and not south into the forests—I could have ended up where Eric Blair was born in Motihari, Bihar, India. My debt to Eric Blair, who later used the name George Orwell, is reflected in the title of this essay and is writ large across *Nightmarch*. If Orwell believed in the deep immersion of his own body directly into the experiences that he was writing about to break stereotypes, *Nightmarch* emerged from years of living as a participant observer with Indigenous communities and Naxalite revolutionaries to challenge received wisdoms about terrorism and romanticized rebels, greed and grievance, poverty and economic growth. If Orwell's purpose was to break through middle-class oblivion, writing *Nightmarch* as an aesthetic experience and not the dry academic text that is valued in academia came from the need to similarly shake up international and middle-class apathy toward these seemingly distant others, people in whose lives we are all deeply implicated whether we recognize it or not. And if Orwell's searing critique of institutionalized forms of socialism and Communism emerged from his fundamental belief in the ideals of the more equal world that socialism represented, *Nightmarch* holds deep sympathies for the revolutionary cause despite its damning, heightening criticisms of revolutionary action.

I thank Greg Rawlings and the Social Anthropology Programme at the University of Otago (Dunedin, New Zealand), which gave me a summer home as a writer in residence for two British winter spells. It was during the first of these terms that I wrote this piece and in the second that I shared it with my

colleagues there. I wrote it initially because of the invitation of the British Association for South Asian Studies to deliver the keynote lecture at its annual conference in March 2019 in Durham, United Kingdom. The association had just set a good example by issuing a statement as an institution against the raids of the houses of Professor Satyanarayana and Professor Teltumbde (before he was imprisoned), and I wanted to salute its show of solidarity to our colleagues who were facing the brunt of repression in South Asia. It was notable because although many statements signed by individuals were being floated, institutional statements carry greater weight; yet very few institutional directors and committees were willing to take such risks. I am grateful to my then PhD students, Sandhya Fuchs, Thomas Herzmark, Megnaa Mehta, and Itay Noy, and to Amariroso for making that Durham meeting so meaningful and memorable. The piece was adapted a month later for a keynote lecture at a conference on the anthropology of revolution at University College London and then again for the Annual Gold Lecture in Anthropology delivered in October 2019. I thank the audiences at these events as well as Maurice Bloch, Rob Higham, Jonathan Parry, Mathijs Pelkmans, and Gavin Smith, who were kind enough to read draft versions of this piece. A panel at the AAA on this theme was convened by Priya Nelson and me. There, I learned a great deal from my fellow panelists Philippe Bourgois, Alex Fattal, Carole McGranahan, and Laurence Ralph, all of whose own work is inspirational. At *Current Anthropology*, it was Laurence Ralph and Lisa McKamy who saw this piece to publication, and I am extremely grateful for the excellent constructive comments I received from reviewers. Serious readers may note with some irony that the Economic and Social Research Council funded the research that led to *Nightmarch* and that the time to write it (and this article) was carved out because of a European Research Council grant. This, though, is an aberration, not the norm.

Comments

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First, I want to thank Alpa Shah for her pathbreaking book *Nightmarch* and for this very insightful and provocative essay reflecting on the limits and potentials of intellectual dissidence within the context of neoliberal, technocratic higher education. In this short comment, I focus on three sentences in the essay that inspire deeper reflection.

First, "Universities, as centers of knowledge production, were always tools of the state and corporations." It is true that the modern "research university" came into being with the objective, in various ways, of enabling the progress of European empire. But as we wrestle with maintaining a dissident spirit within today's neoliberal university, I find it encouraging to

recall the more modest origins of the university as a social institution. The *universitas*, from which the university inherits its name, was a generic medieval contract that could be used to found guilds and other civic associations. It proved a convenient way for groups of aspiring students to formalize relationships with teachers. There is no doubt that the *universitas* conferred social privilege, even certain kinds of civil sovereignty. But the early university involved neither administrators nor audit procedures, let alone billionaire trustees and vast campuses resembling small cities. The early university was nothing more than relations of teaching and learning, and these relations have always made universities' intellectual life worth living. The core endures despite the various ways in which the university's research apparatus has been instrumentalized and perverted over the centuries.

The university today remains a site of political possibility and epistemic struggle alongside its functional accommodation of the interests of states and corporations. A brilliant work that takes this possibility seriously is Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's *The Undercommons*. Harney and Moten (2013) deride the negligent, asocial attitudes of bureaucratization and professionalization that have come to define much of higher education. But they also underscore the resilience of "maroon community" within universities, "*the undercommons of enlightenment*, where the work gets done, where the work gets subverted, where the revolution is still black, still strong" (26).

The undercommons is clearly a dissident space, one that has no donor-named building on campus. Instead, it inhabits the hollows and cracks that marble the institution. Writing is part of its work, but Harney and Moten prefer to emphasize the practice of "planning," which is above all about challenging the negligent asociality of the university through social reproduction in myriad humble forms. That reproduction can be launched "from any kitchen, from any back porch, any basement, any hall," and it operates to maintain not only the bare life of dissident labor but also "the ceaseless experiment with the futural presence of the forms of life that make such activities possible" (74–75).

Second, "Writing is arguably one of the most important aspects of what we do as academics and hence is one of the most significant spaces of the dissidence of our intellect." Listening to colleagues talk, writing is obviously the evergreen desire and crippling anxiety of academic life today. So much is cathected in our keyboards—possibilities of expression, audience, and influence but also the necessity of existential survival as a working academic. One does not get to choose any longer whether one wishes to be a writer in anthropology (Boyer 2016). The surveillance of writing (or, more accurately, publishing) is deeply wired into the audit culture of higher education. And it is not simply a matter of measuring productivity, as Shah rightly notes, but also a constant policing of genre, of how one articulates one's research, where, and for whose benefit. Because in the professionalized space of the university disciplines and departments, all that really counts is one's ability to connect with one's fellow professionals. That means adopting a certain

kind of specialized expert language that signals belonging to an expert community. If one roams lexically or stylistically too far afield from expert conventions, one encounters the invisible fence lines rather quickly. And as in Shah's experience, one is often told, especially early on, that a return to genre form is really in one's best interest.

I have come to feel rather strongly that writing must be made to exceed audit culture and that it is best to start building those good habits when one is young. It is important to keep roaming; the true joy of writing is in that roaming, and joy, as my brilliant colleague Lacy M. Johnson likes to say, is a form that justice takes. Speaking personally, participating in the making of the Okjökull glacier memorial changed my whole perspective on writing. A few poetic sentences on a bronze plaque in a remote place created an emotional reaction for millions. I am quite certain that those sentences will mean more for the dissident cause of climate activism than the rest of my words put together. It is a powerful argument for exceeding conventional genres of writing. The other lesson I take from this experience is that we cannot restrict our dissident expressions to writing alone. Writing is a powerful ally to dissidence but not its only or even always its most effective medium.

Third, "Let us direct our energies, where we can, to challenge hegemony with our scholarship." Like other airborne viruses that plague us, hegemony lives in words but reproduces through practices. Harney and Moten point out, without naming names, that famous critical intellectuals can be among the most negligent and asocial of the academic ranks. I am sure that we can all name names. But there are many more among us who are neither negligent nor asocial but who struggle to follow a guiding light of dissident spirit while practicing a more or less grudging mode of bureaucratic and professional complacency. Academia supports certain economies of critical discourse but always seeks to suppress the organization of dissident practices.

For this reason, let us not restrict our dissident ambitions to writing. We might consider, in the spirit of undercommoning, developing an ethos of dissidence that is at once more pervasive and humbler in its expectations for publicity. Many of us already quietly occupy universities. We can create invisible planning centers for needed projects of repair, reparation, reform, and rebecoming. Practical examples, like the Civic Laboratory for Environmental Action Research group at Memorial University or the Center for Energy and Environmental Research in the Human Sciences network we developed at Rice, abound. The point is not just to challenge the powers that be but also to sustain places of refuge, the *universitas* within the university. Harder times are coming, but maroons will endure.

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Alpa Shah's work with the Marxist-, Leninist-, and Mao-inspired Naxalite insurgents in India is an example of fine ethnography.

And *Nightmarch*, one of Shah's major outputs related to this body of work, crafted in slow writing mode, is an engaging and inspiring anthropological book. It is no coincidence, then, that such research has driven Shah toward a general reflection on why we, as anthropologists, write.

Shah rightly remarks that our writing should take into account the broad historical and political context(s) in which we live. All social scientists, and anthropologists in particular, would do well to bear this in mind. As we aim to challenge dominant narratives, question established truths, or expose hidden realities, we soon realize that there are different forms and degrees of intellectual silencing within and outside the academy. Informed knowledge has an intrinsic, destabilizing power. Attempts at limiting or controlling this potentially emancipatory and transformative power are a constant throughout human history. Shah addresses, for example, the attacks on intellectual freedom in today's India that are targeting intellectuals, journalists, researchers, and activists who are seen as an antinational threat. The case described by Shah is one of those clear manifestations of authoritarian ruling where dissent is in direct antithesis to an institutional (e.g., governmental) or economic (e.g., corporate) power that can suppress antagonism with a variety of violent tools, from intimidation to incarceration to disappearance. Many continue to pay with their lives in their struggle to expose environmental and health disasters or oppose political regimes. Reflecting on how our intellectual efforts can contribute to facing these instances of suppressive violence is, therefore, quite literally a vital issue. Indeed, the how matters. Shah focuses on writing, but there are multiple forms of engagement, including videos, talks, and so on. When we write, whatever the style and format we choose—ranging from ethnographic poetry to policy briefs—our ethnographic witnessing should translate into an outward-oriented engagement rather than remain confined within small (academic) circles.

Dissent is under attack in many places. Shah mentions the lethal mix of neoliberalism, authoritarianism, and right-wing populism that applies to many contexts. Of course, targeting dissent is not new. As I just mentioned, silencing politics is a constant of human history. As a child, I remember my grandparents' stories about the oppression of Italian fascism. As a researcher, I collected many stories about the silencing apparatus of the Taliban regime, and I have studied the different modalities through which "exported democracy" becomes a way of annihilating the voices of the colonized.

What I find particularly striking today is that, besides explicit silencing regimes, there are growing and more subtle dynamics affecting intellectual freedom. One of these could be defined as the tyranny of the politically correct. Singing from a different hymn sheet is nowadays highly risky. A certain degree of conformism is somehow part and parcel of academic history. Public exposure brings a broader and more pervasive connotation of conformism, which seems to have reached dogmatic levels today (and this normally occurs in various left-wing

circles and in the "extreme center").³³ Being politically correct at all costs may have become not simply a comfortable position (one that assures you "friends") but, indeed, essential to public survival. A Twitter trend can have someone fired; a social media storm can destroy a career. An opinion expressed in contrast to the mainstream position can ignite public lynching. In line with these trends, the assumption that confronting ideological conformity is the substance of intellectual work gets lost.

To be intellectually committed, we need to disagree. Shah asks who our reader is. I fear that the general tendency is to write for those who may easily agree with us. Yet we should always push ourselves to reach those who may be disturbed by our writings. And in turn, we should be open to being disturbed ourselves. The simple, basic mechanism of disagreeing is today compromised by a climate of politically correct positioning.

While the modalities through which the space of intellectual freedom is shrinking operate today in different ways than in the past (crucially relevant here is the role of social media and the changes in information and communication technology), their origins go deep. Shah maintains that universities have traditionally been centers of disinterested inquiry, places that have protected and nurtured dissidence. I would challenge this argument. Historically, in most of Europe, for instance, the majority of professors in the social sciences and humanities have come from long-established and well-educated bourgeois families whose members, not necessarily very rich, frequently display left-wing political sympathies and belong to groups of the cultural elite, sharing their cultural capital and indeed spending most of their time with people of similar social status. Only very recently have working-class scholars begun to access academic positions to a significant extent. Yet even today, humanities and social science departments are influenced by this weighty bourgeois legacy. Such a historical process has produced a bourgeois knowledge within which social inequalities have often been aestheticized, turned into "discourse," while all the miserable and more material consequences of social suffering have become less visible.³⁴ In the large corpus of writing that embraces this bourgeois knowledge, for example, slums have been labeled as laboratories of social resistance, the poor are always depicted as the good poor, the migrant is always the good migrant, and so forth, in a paradigmatic extension of the myth of the noble savage. Indeed, there has been a striking proliferation of such (visual, dialogical, virtual) "laboratories," which, on purely logical grounds, make people living in slums akin to guinea pigs. In much of this literature, greed, cruelty, egoism, and the spirit of survival tend to vanish from slums and working-class neighborhoods, and what remains is often an apologetic version of the world explained through at times convoluted anthropological writings.

33. Watch, e.g., this short video by David Graeber about the extreme center: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-9afwZON8dU&t=8s>.

34. <https://allegralaboratory.net/bourgeois-knowledge/>.

Intellectual freedom also depends on the ongoing capacity to guarantee diversity, participation, and inclusion in the centers of knowledge where writing is produced. In this way, writing can be our weapon. It should be.

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Across the world, most academics in the social sciences and humanities are indeed facing the dire challenges that Alpa Shah invokes. When stated in general terms, these challenges do give the impression of being broadly similar. But there is a world of difference between the concrete forms they take and the opportunities, threats, and constraints that they present for academics in particular geopolitical and institutional contexts. The paradoxical precept of our present is that calls for solidarity—even those that wish to “honor the dissidence of our intellect”—will be heeded only if they also honor (and do not merely note) the differences that mark us and the disparate locations that we speak from.

Alpa Shah’s essay contains three themes and one story. She intends that the themes—neoliberal restructuring of the academy, authoritarian regimes and their repression of intellectuals and academic institutions, and modes of academic writing that might address a wider audience—be illuminated by the story of the making of her book *Nightmarch*. The themes are obviously important and urgent, and the story is engaging. However, the essay misses its target because it does not address the mutual misalignment of the themes and the lack of fit between them and the example of *Nightmarch*.

The authoritarianism theme is the most consequential and the most mismatched. Some public intellectuals and academics are being killed, imprisoned, and harassed in India, Turkey, Brazil, and elsewhere by populist authoritarian regimes. But this has little to do with neoliberal managerialism in academia, and it is not a matter of academic writing styles. If anything, it could be argued that intellectuals are persecuted precisely because of their extra-academic appeal. The critical issue here is that the story of *Nightmarch* bears only a metonymic connection to such contexts of persecution, but the tone of the essay implies a stronger relationship. As Shah acknowledges, the section “Curtailed Intellectual Freedom in India” is not about her own experiences. If the intention was to foreground questions of academic freedom, then including books like Nandini Sundar’s (2016) *The Burning Forest* alongside *Nightmarch* would have been an act of true solidarity. I mention Sundar’s book because it is also about Maoist insurgency and written by a university academic for an extra-academic audience; it could have enabled a useful comparison across institutional-national locations. There is a context-specific spectrum of sanctions—ranging from trolling or the denial of funding/visas/tenure, through legal-institutional harassment,

all the way to imprisonment or murder—that needs to be mapped and acknowledged before we can reclaim “the space for intellectual dissidence” as a global community of scholars.

Conversely, if the intention was to foreground *Nightmarch*, then authoritarian persecution elsewhere could have been omitted and more space given to the specific constraints that UK academics face when producing this kind of work. However, the engagement with the neoliberal audit culture theme seems surprisingly thin given that Shah has firsthand experience of the restructuring of the UK academy over the past two decades. A brief but intense involvement in an “international benchmarking review” of “UK sociology” a decade ago (ESRC 2010; *Sociological Review* 2011) allows me to empathize with my UK colleagues. Since the *Nightmarch* project overlaps with the transition from the Research Assessment Exercise to the Research Excellence Framework (REF), a more detailed engagement with this managerial architecture and its consequences would have been valuable. Also useful would be descriptions of the graded vulnerabilities of UK academics in locations differentiated by discipline, type of institution, or seniority.

The concrete links between writing style or choice of audience and the new managerial logic are left unspecified in Shah’s essay, perhaps because they are well known to insiders, but details would certainly help outsiders. For example, the REF’s explicit attention to “impact beyond academia” (a subject our 2010 review panel agonized over) appears to “incentivize” writing for a wider audience—precisely what Shah is urging. An explanation of why this may be a misleading impression and how precisely *Nightmarch* was impacted by the REF and related structures would have helped greatly. As it stands, the points of friction between the two are left to the reader’s imagination.

Finally, I cannot help feeling that there is something anachronistic about Shah’s insistence that the academic establishment is against popular writing. This may have been true in the 1980s, when the then-dominant style was resolutely opaque and involuted. Today, the tables are turned, and academics are under pressure to be accessible even at the cost of precision. Moreover, as Shah herself notes, popular writing is being rewarded by the academy. There is little that prevents established academics from writing for a larger public.

Ultimately, what I miss most in Alpa Shah’s well-meaning plea for global academic solidarity in these difficult times is best captured by that quaint twentieth-century phrase “the politics of location.” Academia is home to the same inequalities and differences that structure the rest of the world. The only advantage academics can claim is that our profession allows (but does not require) us to be self-reflexively aware of the asymmetries of power and privilege.

I write from the security of my tenured professorship in an elite public university in India where I am (mostly) insulated from the pressure to publish. On the other hand, my Indian colleagues and I are more likely to be pulled into public roles than our Anglo-American counterparts. Recently, a colleague at a nearby private university who is also a widely read columnist resigned from his job because he felt that his public

criticism of the government had become a liability for his institution. Another colleague from my own university has been in jail for the past eight months, charged under an antiterrorism law. But my geographical-institutional proximity to them does not mean that I face the same risks. Other colleagues in India or elsewhere who are untenured or work in nonelite institutions or subaltern languages could be far more vulnerable. Calls for solidarity are appeals to transcend differences that are effective only when they respect differences.

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"A lethal mix of neoliberalism, authoritarianism, and right-wing populism is unfolding in varying combinations . . . around the world, and one of its key targets of attack is intellectual freedom." In such a situation, argues Alpa Shah, professor of anthropology at the London School of Economics, it is "pressing for academics as writers to ask, What is our purpose? Who is our reader? How do we navigate the tensions between the constraints of academic evaluation criteria and the compulsions of writing for wider publics, scholarly fidelity and activist commitments, writing as scholars and producing journalism or fiction?"

Through the writing of *Nightmarch*, Shah tries to show us how she took up the brave fight of speaking for the Adivasis, the Indigenous Indian tribes. In her *Current Anthropology* piece, "Why I Write?," she grapples with how universities became such stifling spaces—whether this be due to neoliberal policies in places like the United Kingdom or the repressions meted out by the state in places like India. So on the one hand we have the rise of neoliberal audit cultures all over the world that seem to be "sapping writing of its vitality," and on the other hand we have "Hindu nationalism . . . clamping down fiercely on debate, deliberation, and critique, with human rights activists and intellectuals imprisoned as alleged Maoists or 'urban Naxals.'" Faced with these two spirit-sucking demons that have emptied university spaces of intellectual independence, how do we "honor the dissidence of our intellect?" asks Shah.

Shah starts with the Gramscian position that "for structural transformation toward a more equal and just society, alongside challenges to relations of production, ideological change is crucial. The inequalities surrounding us are maintained not only through coercive domination but also by ideological control." Unfortunately, Shah does not adequately engage with the vicious ideological control exerted by the neoliberal university. The UK-US universities' audit culture, about which Marilyn Strathern warned us back in 2000, is rapidly spreading its suffocating tentacles in countries that have otherwise thrived with robust public university systems: France, Japan, and India, to name a few. Shah could also have mentioned that neither of the two authors (George Orwell and Jean-Paul Sartre

[1946]) with whom she engages at length in relation to the purpose of writing were beholden to the university. Both, in their writings, try to expunge a guilt—British colonialism for the first and the rise of European fascism for the second. This both do by calling for a greater commitment toward collective action. Sartre does it in his article "Why Write?" by noting the hypocrisy of writing: "One of the main motives of artistic creation is certainly the need to feel essential to the world." More damningly, Sartre had concluded that "literature functioned ultimately as a bourgeois substitute for real commitment in the world."

Today's patriarchal corporatization of the university, overrun by managers and marketers, has certainly shaped and mediated many an academic's "real commitment in the world": students gaining access to knowledge only after having contracted enormous debts, adjuncts living in terribly precarious conditions, tenure-track academics working under the intense pressure of metrics, and tenured professors having to reconcile themselves with living under the very selfish individualistic and meritocratic values that do not and cannot enable a collective awareness (or action) to fight the crisis in which we find ourselves (Berg and Seeber 2016:13). This corporatization has not only prioritized certain areas of research and disciplines over others but also remotely controlled academics to research and write for a "brand." Indeed, the commodification of what passes for "knowledge" and the culture of star "experts" where academics are expected to be entrepreneurs of their own brands are a suffocating, slow violence that is killing the university and academic writing much more quickly than many autocratic states have been able to do.

How do we "honor the dissidence of our intellect"? asks Shah. In particular, how can and how do we do that, asks Rohan D'Souza (2020:33), professor at the Graduate School of Asian and African Area Studies at Kyoto University (and previously at Jawaharlal Nehru University), when education as a commodity, brought about by triumphant neoliberalism, constantly undermines the student as a political citizen? Deepak Kumar (2016:124–147), retired professor of the history of science and education at Jawaharlal Nehru University, pertinently argues that the crisis in Indian academia reflects the deeper malaise within India's troubled, unequal, and unjust worlds. From a space that offered "political citizenship" from the late 1940s onward to one that morphed into a space for the "customer-consumer" in the 1990s, in the post-COVID-19 phase, D'Souza (2020:36) saliently argues, in relation to India (but this is applicable elsewhere, too), the malaise will break the university and convert us all into programmable "users," sidelining important responsibilities such as working toward enabling the social mobility of disempowered groups. Indeed, as Ajantha Subramanian (2019) has argued in her excellent book on the elite Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), the defenses of "merit" are themselves expressions of caste privilege and end up reproducing, ad nauseam, social inequality.

The least we can do is decolonize our discipline (in this case anthropology) by highlighting academic imperialism, which, as

the celebrated anthropologist Syed Farid Alatas (2003:601), professor of sociology at the National University of Singapore, pointed out, is another form of colonialism. This, I believe, can be done only by engaging with the intellectual production of Black, Dalit, and queer feminist scholarship. It is the only way we can possibly escape both academic imperialism and our own little “regional closets” (Alexander 2005). As Mythri Jegathesan (2021:1), associate professor at Santa Clara University, recently wrote, this is not just an ethical choice but also one of cosurvival and liberation within the white habitus of anthropology. In an age in which 43% of British people still think that the colonial empire was a good thing and a source of pride (Satia 2020), surely, this is the least we can do. In the face of a money-minting, market-driven, cynical hollowness on the one hand and a brute and violent state-controlled space on the other, can one still expect the university to churn out a citizen who will care about the collective?

Karl Marx observed astutely that “capitalism tends to destroy its two sources of wealth: nature and human beings.” In these times when capital seems to be squeezing out every ounce of life from our only planet, must we not be critical of the capitalist powers that force young men and women to take up armed struggle against an imminent loss of resources? We all need to be writing to expose the Ambanis, Adanis, Bezoses, and Gateses of our world and with them the corporate interests that disallow us from being engaged. The way I see it is that to write is not just to build a common cause between those who, like us, read and write but, critically as well, to strive to search for ways to turn the objects of our analysis into the subjects of our political actions.

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Is ethnography a form of dissent? Or, more precisely, if we follow Alpa Shah’s argument that scholarly writing is a form of intellectual dissidence, then what type of dissent is ethnography? Ethnography is a type of writing but is also more than that; it is also a method and thus a way of knowing and interpreting the world (Geertz 1973; McGranahan 2018). In social and cultural anthropology, ethnography is not a possible method or way of writing. Instead, it is the primary one. Nothing else comes close. This in itself is a form of dissent. Such an adherence to a singular approach is unusual. However, dissent from standard academic practice is not the point of Shah’s essay. Dissent as a form of public political speech is. For some scholars, ethnography is a form of dissent. But is it always? Is it the scholar who dissents, or is dissent built into ethnography?

As method, ethnography is what anthropologists call fieldwork or “participant observation.” This is long-term immersion in a community designed to give the researcher a focused but holistic understanding of life as both officially structured and actually lived by real people. Like life, ethnography is si-

multaneously messy and rigorous, composed of both rules and inconsistencies, and involves sharing joys and sorrows. It is also a practice that scholars have not always gotten right, including in harmful ways, but that we constantly rethink and transform. Part of this is doing ethnography with communities rather than about them and thus developing what Aimee Meredith Cox (2018) calls “unconditional relationality,” or relationships and commitments that transcend research. Such relationship-based participant observation is potentially revolutionary in the sense that it produces knowledge that unsettles received wisdoms and established theories (Shah 2017). However, if ethnography as method seeks to question the status quo, ethnography is not always written as a form of dissent. Why is this? Shah’s recent book *Nightmarch* offers us insights.

Drawing its name from a weeklong 15-mile march Shah (2019) undertook with Naxalite guerrillas in India, *Nightmarch: Among India’s Revolutionary Guerrillas* is an exemplar of ethnography as dissent. The book’s back cover introduces potential readers to the characters we meet here in the pages of *Current Anthropology*, including “Marxist ideologues and lower-caste and tribal combatants,” and then explains that “Shah raises important questions about the uncaring advance of capitalism and offers a compelling reflection on dispossession and conflict.” Returning to London after her research concluded, Shah tells us that she wanted to quickly write a book about the Naxalites. Yet in trying to do so, she was reminded of disciplinary lore: ethnography must be written slowly. Thus, despite the urgency she felt, she settled in to write the book, committing to writing it to be read by a range of readers.

Not all ethnography is written for an audience beyond academia. Some is, but most is not. Much academic writing remains a conversation among insiders. Often, even when academics aim to write for a broader readership, they have only minimal success. There are multiple reasons for this. Academic presses are nonprofit enterprises, without the marketing budgets of trade presses, and academic authors write, for better or worse, like academics. They write to report research results, make intellectual arguments, and situate their ideas in scholarly genealogies. This sort of writing can be distancing for non-academic readers. With *Nightmarch*, Shah joins a growing number of scholars writing for wider audiences. She tells stories about people. She moves discussions of literature and sources to the end of the book. She makes arguments that grow from experience. She thinks out loud, does not shy from choosing narrative over ideology, includes herself as a character in the book, and highlights contradictions.

This brings us back to dissent. To dissent is to challenge norms, to raise one’s voice in protest, to take a position of principle (Kelly 2019). Not all intellectual knowledge takes such a stand. However, whereas not all scholarship highlights contradiction, participant observation embraces it. As Shah details beautifully in *Nightmarch*, ethnographic research finds truths in the contradictions of individuals and societies. Here lies a key difference Shah asserts between research and activism: participant observation is a “democratic commitment to the truth in

a holistic sense,” whereas activism has “moral commitments” that can keep activists from seeing inconsistencies and on-the-ground realities (Shah 2017:56–57). Writing these contradictions and realities into the world is to write against something. It is to write against complacency or oppression or both. When we write ethnography, we write to teach, to reveal, to celebrate, and to challenge. And sometimes we write to dissent.

Dissent requires an active agent. Like refusal, dissent is willful (McGranahan 2016; Simpson 2016). It is a combination of public acts and intimate relations (Amarasuriya et al. 2020). Like dissent, ethnography involves the public and the intimate, which, as Shah contends, can be revolutionary. Scholars across disciplines realize this potential, turning universities into sites of critique to which others may respond with surveillance and censorship. Revolution is dangerous, critical thinking threatens the status quo, and ethnography unnerves what we think we know about the world.

Except when it does not. Not all scholarship or all participant observation is revolutionary. While ethnography holds the possibility of dissent, it requires intention to activate it. Alpa Shah provides us with an example of how to do this. Her writing style matters—cultivating a narrative voice, eliminating jargon, rethinking citations—as does publishing with a press committed to attracting a public audience. Writing as dissent is an issue of what and why, not only of how. Contradictions tie Marxist guerrilla insurgents to the world they seek to change. Shah shows this to speak truth to power, including truths that the insurgents hold from themselves and from society. Most importantly, though, as Shah realizes in writing *Nightmarch*, scholarship as dissent cannot be taken for granted as a serendipitous arising. It must be consciously chosen and actively worked on. This then is her invitation to us: ethnography’s unique way of knowing can be a form of dissidence only if we choose it.

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In “Why I Write?,” Alpa Shah raises several important questions and concerns that are both urgent and central to the discipline of anthropology. Put simply, her paper addresses the “why,” “how,” and “where” of anthropological writing—that is, the urgency of writing, the style in which this is done, and the context in which writing is made possible or not. In what follows I briefly comment on the “neoliberal university” (“where”), then problematize the concept of the dissident in a posttruth era (“why”), and finally comment on what anthropological writing is about in this context (“how”).

The University

As Shah indicates, in many places of the world, public universities are increasingly managed as companies, with mecha-

nisms and incentives aimed at more competition among staff and output measured in quantity rather than quality. Moreover, this neoliberal organization of academic life and work leaves less room for fulfilling our roles as “critic and conscience of society” (Shore 2018). The university is thus increasingly losing its moral compass with respect both to society in its role as a site for reflection and “responseability” (Haraway 2016) and to the academic community, where competition and temporary contracts are producing precarity. In the past years, this neoliberal policy and its consequences have been severely critiqued and have in many places led to varied protest, such as demonstrations, sit-ins, and occupations. For example, at my university in 2015, as students and staff we occupied the main building of the university for more than a month, when we demanded insight into the finances of the university, reform and democratization of its structure, and a commitment to diversity.³⁵ This is to indicate that the concerns of Alpa Shah are palpable for many and urgent to attend to. Such protests exemplify the stakes we have in universities and related institutions. Yet ironically enough, this is the reason for my hesitance about the notion of the dissident.

The Dissident

In “A New Type of Intellectual: The Dissident,” Julia Kristeva (1986) writes: “This ruthless and irreverent dismantling of the workings of discourse, thought, and existence is . . . the work of a dissident” (299). For Kristeva, thought itself is nothing but dissidence. I can fully relate to the fact that the practice of thought and of writing requires some version of exile, of moving away from the familiar, to make strange what we are in the habit of taking for granted. I have often likened the process of thinking and writing to a process of “moving in and out,” in and out of the field, of theory, of academia, and so on. This recurring moving in and out indicates that the field, theory, and academia are not singular; different moments of relating help to explain their heterogeneity and fluid nature. And this is why reading Alpa Shah’s paper made me wonder about the politics of the dissident in relation to academia. Not in general, but in this very moment in time. A moment of posttruth and alternative facts. The problem is this: the concept of the dissident, however important as a situated practice of academic work, has the tendency to homogenize and totalize what it is that the dissident is “sitting apart from.” In this case the university. For today there is another, a more vocal voice claiming dissidence: the posttruth voice. This is obviously not one singular voice but a bundle of voices aimed at weakening (the working of) institutions such as the university (e.g., M’charek 2017). This dissident position is claimed and embraced not so much as a practice of doing academic work but as a political

35. This protest came to be known as ReThink UvA; see <http://rethinkuva.org>. For the broader concerns, see also the Dutch documentary *De Slimme Universiteit* (<https://www.vpro.nl/programmas/tegenlicht/kijk/afleveringen/2015-2016/slimme-universiteit.html>).

tool for mobilization. A tool to discredit the university as a leftist and ideological site, with intellectuals occasionally labeled as “cultural Marxists,” rather than a site for reflection and knowledge production. By contrast, for Shah the relation with academia is vital; for her it is key to write as a scholar. Thus, whereas the dissident position embraced by Shah comes with a version of care for academic institutions, in the form of both “thinking and dissenting with” the university (Puig de la Bel-lacasa 2012), the posttruth voice does not care. The problem is that the difference between care and contempt is bound to get lost in the loud and convoluted politics of suspicion vis-à-vis the state, the intellectual, and the Other.

The Writing

This very context makes the point of anthropological writing beyond the realm of academia even more acute. As we are interpellated as academics and writers, it speaks to the “how” of our writing. What kinds of texts do we produce, and what do they do? How do they relate to the world? For there are lessons to be learned about the gist of anthropological writing from this context. It is by now common knowledge that fighting alternative truth claims by mobilizing the “scientific facts” is a road to nowhere. For nowadays, it seems that just anybody can conduct research and produce facts after spending one night or so on the worldwide web, a demonstration of the radical trivialization of academic institutions. This context, however, provides a reflexive moment for anthropologists. It makes clear that the power of anthropological writing is not in “disclosing the world and injustices” but in producing evocative stories. Not to provide a definitive answer but to evoke thinking and attention to questions that are relevant for a wider public. Our writings are indeed “partial truths” (Clifford 1986). For they are situated in place and time and fictionalized—for example, through modes of generalization (Shah; M’charek 2013). Language and words are thus methods to evoke reality, to establish links between seemingly distant places and times. Language and words are operators to invite thought and engagement.

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Scandalizing in and through Anthropology

The strength of anthropology is in scandalizing (or disrupting; see Geertz 1984) that which is taken for granted. This includes the processes of state-censored knowledge production and the dominance of Euro-American thoughts. Anthropology, in other words, has the potential to disconcert taken for granted processes and ideas, including those that reproduce violence, hegemony, and oppression. Alpa Shah calls for such an anthropology and ethnographic writing that has the potential to

scandalize violent and hegemonic processes in multiple modes in a diversity of platforms. This is an important call for the future of anthropology as the discipline tries to reinvent itself against the onslaught against academic freedom and the neoliberalization of universities. This is also in line with anthropology being a radical discipline of minor discourse that provides expression to what is often considered unimportant in the ruling sciences and discourses of dominance (Kapferer 2013:819). Shah lifts public anthropology’s spirit in this most welcome piece by expanding its scope and the significance of engaging with the broader community beyond anthropology’s contributory role in public and corporate policies.

Moving beyond a discussion on strangeness and intimacy as integral to the ethnographic research method, Shah focuses on a kind of relationality that places both the ethnographer and the interlocutors beyond this strange and intimate duality. This is clear from Shah’s argument with the Maoist leaders on the possibilities of human freedom. This discussion did not seem to be designed to produce ethnographic texts but as a collaborative production of ideas that could be discussed and debated on a number of platforms. By doing so, Shah also deexoticizes groups who fight against state violence and social oppression but are often portrayed by the state as antistate and antipeople. Consequently, Shah’s concerns exceed contemporary orientations in anthropological writing. Shah emphasizes engaging with ordinary human beings and sharing their concerns by placing anthropologists very much as part of the ordinary. In a way, this further extends Shah’s argument on the radical potential of ethnographic praxis (Shah 2017). Take, for example, the way Shah discusses the lives of many Maoist guerrillas; she discusses them not only as her interlocutors or informants but also as fellow human beings who share concerns that are common to one another. This places anthropologists, the guerrilla fighters, and the intellectuals in the jails within a single field of vulnerability and precarity relationally (although, of course, while remaining mindful of the vast differences in privilege and power existing among them). This cosmological vision comes from a recognition that anthropological writing, at least in principle, has the potential to offer a just and fair treatment to human actions irrespective of human beings’ differentiated positionings in terms of region, country, culture, and categories of identity (Kapferer 2013).

Judith Butler (2004) makes a similar argument. She proposes that the precarious life of Others is not that of the Other but of everyone. This is especially so in the context of state-led violence, such as war and the state’s control over how individuals and groups are represented. In many parts of the world, the contemporary state intensifies violence, suspends constitutional rights, and cultivates a culture of fear through censorship and anti-intellectualism in its attempt to resist dissidence. Butler explores the way the hegemonic state weaves together images and stories to legitimize violence against certain others. Butler illustrates her point by examining the incarceration and inhuman torture of certain individuals in Guantanamo Bay detention camp. Similarly, Shah discusses the killing of Maoist

leaders and the jailing of intellectuals who are portrayed as “urban Naxals.” In both the Indian and the US situations, the state, with the help of certain powerful media houses, is able to stigmatize the lives of certain others. The stigmatization is made possible by portraying the other as a threat to the existence of the state. Both Butler and Shah seem to call for scandalizing such efforts by powerful states by opening up the contradictions in the rationalities that the states generate in support of the violence they perpetuate. Such a process would also denaturalize such processes and their emerging rationalities. This positive scandalizing is needed to “reinvigorate the intellectual projects of critique . . . [and] of coming to understand . . . demands of cultural translation and *dissent*” (Butler 2004:151) and “to have a real impact beyond the academy and to begin reclaiming a more public dissident space for anthropology.” Shah’s dissidence and Butler’s dissent are also at the heart of how a postcolonial anthropology largely stands in opposition to state power and violence.

Alpa Shah’s discussion echoes much of critical anthropology, which is in the continual process of decolonizing at multiple levels. Shah points out the significance of examining oppressive contexts of postcolonial societies and the emergence of local elites. Decolonization has little meaning if the idea is not reformulated—for example, in the Indian context, by the significance of de-Brahmanization or the annihilation of caste-ethnic hierarchies. It also involves a serious engagement with the vernacular as an instrument not only of research but also of dialogue with the wider public. Therefore, it is essential to have popular anthropological writings translated into vernacular languages. This will facilitate decolonization of the practice of intellectual dissidence as well. Such practices will bring anthropologists and the wider public closer to work toward a project that continually generates a consensus against state violence, social oppression, and capitalist dispossession.

The internal diversity of anthropology has the potential to incorporate the diverse kinds of writings that Shah calls for. Such writing is demanded not only by the contemporary political-economic developments of authoritarian populism and neoliberal capitalism but also by the need to recenter anthropology as a key discipline in the social sciences and to challenge the threat of disciplinary redundancy. At the same time, the kind of anthropological writing that Shah suggests is distinct from that which claims to be “popular ethnography” but that takes away complexities in an impatient attempt to commoditize the “exotic.” This distinction needs to be made to differentiate accessible ethnographic writings derived from anthropological rigor from patronizing commoditization.

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Alpa Shah uses the process of ethnographic writing about revolutionaries to problematize the issue of “dissidence” among

academics in the age of neoliberalism. Her much acclaimed book *Nightmarch: Among India’s Revolutionary Guerrillas* took a remarkably honest and brave trajectory for anthropological dissidence in our times. Having followed the lead of an informant into their forest hideout, Shah went beyond ritualistic revolutionary small talk as she spontaneously joined the Naxalite night march for more than a week.

Shah uses her revolutionary stint embedded in a longer ethnography of Indian Adivasis to advance anthropological modes of writing dissidence. She wanted her book to tell the story of the Adivasi revolutionaries to touch the hearts of the world “in the way that [they] . . . had touched [her].” In this disseminative mode lies her epistemological dilemma as an anthropologist: Why do we write, and are we aware who our audience is? While this paper reminds its readers of the tradition of dissidence within conventional anthropology, it could have done more to acknowledge dissidence as a universal human condition whose compelling power transcends the boundaries of Euro-American theorization. Shah does invoke several academics and other intellectuals in India who have chosen to dissent and are facing state clampdown, including incarceration for walking on this path, but unfortunately, their scholarship, written or lived, does not sufficiently inform her theorization of dissidence.

Shah’s earlier writing probed the tension between Adivasi civilizational values and the modern Indian state. She urged her readers to recognize that Adivasi resistance against state-sponsored corporate violence is just a minor facet of their bigger worldview and must be differentiated from citizens’ protests calling for the spirit of postcolonial democracy to be restored. Later, as she turns her attention to the dissident public intellectuals in India who are being framed as “urban Naxalites” by the authoritarian state—a label refuted by the dissidents themselves—she finds their parallel in the Euro-American universities closer to home, whose narratives about austerity euphemize market co-optation of knowledge. This is a vast spectrum to cover, and Shah calls for a new epistemology that may combine ethnography with popular writing while contemplating her own position as a scholar from the margins now based in the center. I see her logic of invoking neoliberalism as an anchor through which to understand the hegemony of state and educational institutions, but I am not sure that it helps to flatten out its history, which then leads to the conflation of positions in both arenas of domination.

While her earlier work among the Adivasis is grounded in conventional ethnography, epistemologies will have to and do vary as she embarks on an anthropology of dissidence. Ethnographic narratives simply validating “I was there” do not help connect the dots spanning oceans and civilizations. It is also important to beware of the traps of cultural and civilizational exotica, which divide human movements rather than build universal solidarities. I agree with Shah and embrace her point about the limitations of greed and grievance theories of revolution. I also like the way she points to the dangers of one-dimensionality and explains how Adivasi guerrillas continue to

be driven by the Adivasi spirit and kinship even while joining a modern armed insurgency against the state. My point of contention is what I believe is the need to integrate the analysis of the tension between Adivasi civilizational values and the citizenship movement waged by their non-Adivasi allies within India with interpretations of their modern subversion of state oppression and the onslaught of market forces. To the extent that Shah reported the Adivasis embracing the Marxist dogma, however much it “disabled them from fully addressing major issues . . . corrupting them from within,” their civilizational worldview has now evolved discursively with the dogmatic (and pragmatic) staging of dissidence. Adivasi civilizational values should not be seen as static and in isolation from the ecosystem of the modern state and citizenry surrounding them, and the two should not be seen as simple binary opposites.

The craft Shah showed in her book in “humanizing” the dissidents to weave a compelling story about the Indian Naxalite movement was exemplary and should be applauded. She does not take any shortcuts, and she does not let any nuances drop. That approach could be strengthened with deeper reflection on the traps of depoliticizing and exotica. I am uneasy about the inference in this paper that the Adivasi guerrillas were Adivasi kin or just subaltern order takers and not active comrades with agency who joined an armed revolution as a subversive expression. The anthropological tradition of documenting interlocutors as emotional individuals is its strength, but undermining their political aspirations (or despair) may end up serving as a disciplinary Achilles heel. This is best avoided in projects seeking to reclaim, as Shah states, the “political, even revolutionary potential” of anthropological writing.

I substantiate my point about the broader revolutionary domain encompassing the Adivasi struggle through the anthropology of the rebellion in Nepal just across the border from India; the organic ties of this movement with the Indian Naxalites have been documented in Shah’s work and the academic collaborations she used to document their shared trajectories. I have been struck by the ironies of global anthropological interest in the People’s War in Nepal (1996–2006): As Euro-American projects on the anthropology of dissidence expanded in Nepal, ethnographies analyzing the ideology and practice of ethnic politics within the Maoist revolution began to dry out, while there was a proliferation of ethnographies documenting the everyday lives of ordinary Adivasis (including subaltern guerrillas) living in the remote mountains. Anthropology seemed to depict Maoist guerrillas as mere Adivasi (Janajati) individuals or communities rather than soldiers who chose (or were persuaded) to fight a guerrilla war at a national scale.

The problem of keeping the wider and ultimately decisive (hard) politics outside their ethnographic gaze or portraying Janajati engagement in the Maoist movement piecemeal but not in whole is threefold: First, anthropology’s selective gaze on its “rural” frontiers—often seen with the tints of Janajati exotica—misportrayed this movement, leaving out its urban fronts, including the trade union and civil society apparatuses.

Second, and more importantly, anthropological interest in the Maoist movement in Nepal dried out as the guerrillas joined mainstream politics and the exotica of the “revolution” dwindled. Euro-American scholarly interest dropped. The result is that there is very little written anthropologically that explains how a ragtag armed outfit from the extreme margins came to rule a nation and what the denouement of that drama might be. Third, the limitations of the democratic mainstreaming of a Maoist movement—however enthusiastically (if hastily) it was forged at the time—have opened up avenues of authoritarianism whose roots in post–People’s War complexities are intricate, and this has not been written about anthropologically.

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Anthropology, Orwell, and Academic Freedom

Alpa Shah’s essay is both a critique of contemporary authoritarianism and a call to arms to speak out against the curtailment of academic freedom and intellectual dissent. In the best tradition of anthropological writing, she brings together deeply personal experience with highly analytical and theoretically informed insights. While the erosion of academic freedom in British universities is of a different order from the draconian measures used by India’s Hindu nationalist government to repress those it accuses of being public enemies and “urban Naxalites,” her focus on the repression of India’s Maoist-inspired insurgents and dissident university professors offers a lens for thinking about power and intellectual dissent in Western societies. In this short commentary, I draw on my own experience of conducting fieldwork among Communists and reflect on the importance of Orwell’s other writings.

Shah’s questions “Why do I write?” and “Who is my audience?” are central to debates about the relevance, identity, and purpose of anthropology today. Yet the question “How do I write?” is equally important. Here, too, George Orwell offers some valuable insights. Orwell’s (2021 [1946]) essay “Politics and the English Language” powerfully critiqued the debasement of language and the implications of “ugly and inaccurate” prose. Writing against the fashion for “vagueness,” “pretentious diction,” “meaningless words,” and “political conformity” among many contemporaries, he argued that “the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts” (Orwell 2021 [1946]:10). The obtuseness, conformity, and inaccessibility of most academic writing today, particularly social science writing, which is primarily written for other academics rather than the general public, invites similar criticism. One reason for this is the career structure and professional “habitus” that universities produce and the lingering belief that to be regarded as intellectually sophisticated, academic prose must be complex, must be full of jargon, and preferably must contain

copious allusions to the works of fashionable poststructuralist theorists and philosophers. University hiring panels, promotions boards, and research assessment exercises reinforce this conformity. While many profess openness to other forms of output and claim not to measure “quality” by the standing of the journal where an article is published, most nevertheless defer to traditional “hegemonic” understandings of what constitutes “excellence.”

The spread of managerial accountancy practices throughout universities also produces political and intellectual conformity, as Shah notes. Audit culture was no accidental by-product of the post-1980s new public management reforms; it was central to government projects aimed at opening up British universities to the disciplines of the market, typically framed as promoting student choice; enhancing quality, efficiency, and “value for money”; and making academic work more “transparent” and “accountable” (Shore 2008). These measures provided ideal political technologies for steering higher education, controlling institutions at a distance, and reshaping academic subjectivities. The pressure-cooking environment and seemingly permanent state of crisis these reforms produced have made it extremely difficult to critique, let alone oppose, these changes. Academics have been very vocal in “decolonizing the university,” but the recolonization of higher education by managerialist regimes of technomoral governance (Bornstein and Sharma 2016) and financialization often passes unchallenged (Shore and Wright 2017).

Like Shah, I gained insights into the politics of repression and hegemony carrying out fieldwork among a community often portrayed by politicians as subversive and enemies of the state. My research participants were Italian Communist Party (PCI) activists, and the backdrop was the early 1980s, a time of renewed Cold War tensions. I had gone to Italy because I was interested in studying counterhegemonic political movements, and the PCI, the party that Gramsci founded, seemed to be pioneering a novel form of organization, a mass-Marxist party with a vast community network espousing revolutionary rhetoric that was paradoxically committed to political pluralism, constitutionalism, and parliamentary democracy (Shore 1990). More importantly, the PCI had successfully rid itself of its Leninist party features. Orwell would have recognized the importance of this. As an ardent critic of totalitarianism, he, like Rosa Luxemburg (1961), saw the dangers of the Leninist party model and the risk of dictatorship inherent in Lenin’s theory of the one-party state. Orwell’s (1959) experiences of Stalinism as a militiaman in the Spanish Civil War, documented in *Homage to Catalonia*, were the catalyst for his commitment to writing against totalitarianism and for democratic socialism.

What would Orwell have made of India’s Naxalite insurgents? He may have denounced their persecution and the Modi government’s silencing of academic freedom, but he would not have supported their Marxist-Leninist ideology. He might have asked, What would a Naxalite party do if it were in government? Similarly, what would a Naxalite university look like? Would it be a bastion of liberalism, tolerance, free speech, and

intellectual dissent? These liberal ideals have not fared well under Maoist regimes, as the examples of China, Laos, and North Korea show. But how far UK universities still embody these liberal ideals is also a question that we need to ask and to write about (ideally, in prose that is accessible to nonacademic audiences). Like an independent press, the public university, academic freedom, and the ability for academics to play a role as critic and conscience of society are fundamental to an open society and to democracy itself. This makes it all the more imperative for anthropologists to write against totalitarianism in all its contemporary manifestations (see <https://allegra.laboratory.net/todays-totalitarianism/>), including the authoritarianism within our own institutions.

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This heartfelt essay asks us to think about why we write anthropology—and the obligations we incur when we go to our desks. Amid violence and hate in what was supposed to be a more enlightened millennium, Shah wants anthropology to claim a more public voice for good. Her essay powerfully considers the paradoxes and possibilities of that endeavor.

The socially minded vision of anthropology in Shah’s essay has a proud genealogy. Although his contribution may still be debated, the founding patriarch of modern American anthropology, Franz Boas, advocated for human equality and cross-cultural understanding, at least enough to have his books burned by the Nazis. His students, including Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict, were leading public intellectuals in the progressive tradition. The upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s led to more radical calls for a more activist anthropology on both sides of the Atlantic. And the Black Lives Matter movement has renewed those decolonizing demands with a new urgency.

Although the likes of classroom teaching and social media deserve their own consideration as spaces for intervention, the matter of writing concerns Shah in this piece. I share her wish for a more righteous anthropology, but I feel perhaps less optimistic about its possibilities. How much does our writing really matter? My nine-year-old’s favorite YouTuber, MrBeast, has 50 million subscribers. A university press ethnography is lucky to sell 1,000 copies. People still read, and, in fact, we are drowning in what Richard Seymour (2019) calls “the twittering machine” and its flood of words and texts. It is rather that our “scholarly enclosure,” as Shah describes it, makes for very limited readerships in an age of 280-character posts where celebrity memoirs and self-help books dominate the bestseller lists. In reflecting on her own *Nightmarch*, Shah notes the difficulties of trying to write for more general audiences—our lack of training in crafting good narrative nonfiction,

academic condescension about “popularizing” books, and our own doubts. And pseudoanthropological big idea books like Jared Diamond’s *Guns, Germs, and Steel* and Yuval Noah Harari’s *Sapiens* seem always to hog market share anyway.

I wonder also about the concept of intellectual dissidence and its resonances. At least in origins, it conjures for me a somewhat masculinist imagery of the brave lone truth teller, with Orwell himself as an archetype. A self-righteous crank as well as a great figure of the twentieth century, Orwell might well have been contemptuous of us twenty-first-century anthropologists and our somewhat herdish power-denouncing, subaltern-sympathizing, pluriversal-friendly sensibilities. Dissidence strikes me as an appealing yet slippery concept by virtue of its relativity. A xenophobe railing against migrants in a liberal town meeting is a dissenter, but I do not think that is the kind of dissent Shah wants to encourage. So is our calling to intellectual dissidence—or rather to dissidence of a certain stamp? One that advances a more left-leaning way of seeing the world and its injustices? Yet doesn’t this quite orthodox modern anthropological worldview, with its assumptions about the evils of the contemporary neoliberal order, entail its own blindnesses, clichés, and unexamined premises, as any way of seeing does? I am not sure about any of this.

Reading Shah’s essay recalled for me another meditation about academic obligations, Max Weber’s (1946 [1917]) “Science as a Vocation.” With a depressive’s feel for the world’s unresolvable dilemmas, Weber insisted that there are no fixed answers to what he saw as the ultimate questions of how we should live and what really matters. It is the great contribution of Shah’s essay to get us thinking more about conscience and politics in our professional lives. It is up to us to stumble as best we can along the pathways she suggests—or down others of our own.

Reply

Why Write?

A joy it is to see these comments on my essay “Why I Write?,” many of which come from scholars whose own research and writings have inspired mine. I thank them all for their expansive reflections, which range from discussions of dissent and solidarity to reclaiming the universitas and decolonization. If my inspiration for writing the essay was Orwell, my inspiration for writing this comment is Sartre. In his essay “Why Write?,” Sartre (1947) focused on the transaction between the writer and the reader. Even though we always write for the sake of readers, our texts are empty letters until our readers engage us. The written word can reveal itself only in the context of the reader’s perception, imagination, and vision. Sartre contended that reading requires an atmosphere of trust, which cannot be conveyed apart from a spirit of generosity. A reader should exercise their generosity by reading and revealing particular

facets of text. Reading thus requires a pact of generosity between authors and readers. What I find particularly uplifting about the generosity of these readers is an overwhelming desire—despite a few quibbling voices and some misunderstandings—to further the kind of intellectual dissidence in the university and scholarly relevance beyond academia I hoped to promote through the writing of the essay. I am heartened to find, as Amade M’charek puts it, that the concerns of the essay are palpable for many and urgent to attend to.

Dissidence is indeed a slippery concept, as Orin Starn notes. But yes, my purpose is unashamedly for the service of challenging inequalities and structures of dominance and oppression and creating spaces of democracy and, as M’charek notes, spaces of care (not contempt). This is a call for an anthropology, as Jayaseelan Raj says, “that has the potential to scandalize violent and hegemonic processes in multiple modes in a diversity of platforms.” Carole McGranahan provides a thoughtful meditation on dissent in anthropology. She is surely right that while ethnography as method seeks to question the status quo, not all ethnography is a form of dissent in the written form; our dissent must be willful, cannot be taken for granted, is not serendipitous, must be consciously chosen and worked on. As Sartre (1947) said, “The engaged writer knows that words are action . . . that to reveal is to change and that one can reveal only by planning to change.” I would add, though, that even for those of us for whom dissent is important, not all our writing will explicitly activate that aim. Different kinds of writing serve different purposes. In my case, as I say in the piece, I had to work out the theoretical implications of my research in more than 10 academic articles for specialist audiences before I was ready to translate the theoretical implications into the characters, narrative arc, and story of *Nightmarch*.

In the spirit of the dialectical relationship between reading and writing that Sartre laid out, I take energy from these commentaries to nurture our collective conversations further. But before I do that, let me clarify my original purpose in writing the article, which was, in fact, far more modest and humbler than the wide-ranging conversations generated by these commentaries. In a wider context of the shrinking spaces of intellectual dissidence in our universities, my purpose was simply to urge ourselves to ask some questions about why we write. I explicitly rejected not only the idea of pathways, as Starn puts it, but also the idea of providing answers. “There is no blueprint, no model, no prefigured ideal. . . . My purpose is not to provide answers but to raise the question, draw attention to its importance, signal the need for us to ask it of ourselves.” My focus was the writing of books, and the method I used was to share the case of my own twists and turns in the writing of my book *Nightmarch*. At the outset, I stated that we will answer the question of “why I write” in our own ways.

The politics of location that Satish Deshpande highlights is central to how we will answer that question. In the essay, I said that “the threat to academic freedom has evolved in varied forms in different places,” that the “managerialism crushing academic freedom in the United Kingdom is elsewhere

combined with an attack on intellectual dissidence that is more explicitly political,” and that “there are differences among countries and even within countries.” Solidarity of course needs to respect these differences, which is why, in part, I chose to focus my essay only on the questions that I was faced with in writing my book *Nightmarch*. Deshpande says that an act of “true solidarity” would have included Nandini Sundar’s book. There are many others I could have included if comparison and mapping had been the point. In fact, I end *Nightmarch* (Shah 2019:270–295) with a major bibliographic essay discussing not only the work done by Sundar (which I had to comparatively discuss elsewhere as well; Shah 2013c) but also 50 other books on the Maoist movement in India published in the past 10 years—including the writings of scholars like Gautam Navlakha, Varavara Rao, Shoma Sen, Arun Ferreira, and Anand Teltumbde, who are all currently in prison without trial, incarcerated under antiterror laws as alleged “urban Naxals.” There are important differences in the politics of location to consider between Sundar and all of these imprisoned scholars, who are also, I should say, my friends. These include differences of class and caste privilege, gender, and institutional affiliation (or a lack thereof). And these variations are in turn mapped onto graded differences in the ways in which these intellectuals have experienced the clampdown of academic freedom, the authoritarianism of the state, and their ability to protect themselves from it. All of these differences are undeniably important, but at the same time, especially when a major weakness of the democratic left is its internal fights, factions, and divisions, it is more important than ever in this current moment in time to join forces wherever and whenever we can. For me, as I state in my essay, the circumstances of my friends in the subcontinent “put into perspective the insignificance of the institutional closure I felt back in the United Kingdom with the professionalization of academia and heightened my awareness of my privileged position outside India.” The effect was that “the responsibility of the uniqueness and significance of the stories I carried weighed ever more heavily. I continued to work clandestinely on the book I felt that I ought to write.” And as I have done so, the dissident writings of those scholars who are now incarcerated in India have been, contrary to what Mallika Shakya suggests, central to the development of my theorizations. In fact, their impact on me has been so profound that my next book—the one I have put aside to pen this response—is devoted to these intellectuals and activists and their incarceration. As Raj says, my overall vision comes from a recognition that “anthropological writing, at least in principle, has the potential to offer a just and fair treatment to human actions irrespective of human beings’ differentiated positionings in terms of region, country, culture, and categories of identity.” While we cannot assume it, in our efforts to write, we need the generosity of our readers, particularly of our would-be allies.

I could not agree more with Cris Shore that the question “How do I write?” is as important as “Why I write?” given the “obtuseness, conformity, and inaccessibility of most academic writing,” as he puts it. My own section on “how I write” could have been an entire essay, and it is great to see much more

attention being paid to this in anthropology since I began writing *Nightmarch*. Deshpande feels that there is something anachronistic in my concerns. I wish that he were correct. The pressures felt by the rest of my commentators suggest otherwise. As Dominic Boyer notes, from experience of the US system, “The surveillance of writing . . . is deeply wired into the audit culture of higher education.” Apart from measuring productivity, there is indeed “a constant policing of genre, of how one articulates one’s research, where, and for whose benefit.” I wish that I had answers to the questions that Deshpande asks about the precise workings of the UK Research Excellence Framework in driving similar processes. Despite the fact that I have asked for more information, it remains a total mystery to me. The lack of transparency itself, wittingly or unwittingly, perhaps works as a further means of control; what is not apparent cannot be challenged and may also become a smoke screen for the imposition of internal controls and hierarchies within departments and faculties. It is a sign of how insidious and powerful these processes of evaluation and control can be. In his response, Shore gives some insight into how the broader processes work: “While many profess openness to other forms of output and claim not to measure ‘quality’ by the standing of the journal where an article is published, most nevertheless defer to traditional ‘hegemonic’ understandings of what constitutes ‘excellence.’” Thus, Shore says, “University hiring panels, promotions boards, and research assessment exercises reinforce this conformity.” Annu Jalais notes that the UK-US universities’ audit culture is spreading across the world, including in India. Like Boyer, I fear that worse is to come unless we act collectively to curtail its reach.

Boyer says that “writing must be made to exceed audit culture and that it is best to start building those good habits when one is young.” I fully agree, even though the constraints and pressures are undeniably the greatest for early-career scholars seeking jobs and promotion. If we do not give scholars the freedom, encouragement, and support necessary to explore the joys of writing accessibly and creatively from the start, the system is set up so that they become “established” not only by conforming to the stifling audit culture but also by becoming a vehicle of its reproduction, advising more junior scholars on how to pass through the hoops and what not to do. In this process, writing creativity gets beaten out of most as they climb up the academic hierarchy. Although there are of course exemplary scholars who do write for wider publics, for the most part, unless one makes a concerted effort to learn to write anew (or serendipitously keep alive a burning flame), it is often too late. Therefore, although I would love to agree with Deshpande that there is nothing that prevents established academics from writing for a larger public, I am afraid that I hold a different view.

So what was at stake in the case of the writing of *Nightmarch*? It was not possible to do justice to the arguments of the book itself in this article on writing. However, to correct some misunderstandings about its central concerns, let me clarify at the very least a few issues. The book *Nightmarch* is a direct

challenge to the state and corporate forces—which Jalais calls for at the end of her commentary—that have created terrorists out of young Indigenous people. There is, though, no claim to speak for India’s Indigenous people, its Adivasis (as Jalais seems to think). Rather, I try to show how very different kinds of people come together to take up arms to change the world and analyze what happens in that process. These include the high-caste leaders from well-to-do backgrounds who broke ties with their families and “declassed” and “decasted” themselves to be underground for more than 20 years (like the character Gyanji in part 3 of the book), the Adivasi foot soldiers who found among the guerrillas a home away from home (like the character Kohli in part 4), other Adivasis who turned into the very gangs that betrayed the revolutionary struggle (like the character Vikas in part 5), and the Adivasi women who made me see how patriarchy persists within the revolutionary ranks (like the character Somwari in part 6). By showing how the stories of all of these different people were so much more complex and more beautiful and more human than appears at first sight, the book—as Raj acknowledges—“deexoticizes groups who fight against state violence and social oppression but are often portrayed by the state as antistate and antipeople.” Indeed, the book shows the very human motivations for both how and why they have taken up arms and how, in doing so, they can undermine their own aims and communities.

I did seek to develop the theoretical field of studying revolutions and armed conflict beyond theories of greed, grievance, or being stuck between two armies to show the intimacy of insurgency, as Shakya notes. This included taking seriously and studying both the Naxalites’ revolutionary vanguard and the Adivasi foot soldiers, the ideological affinity that was created between them, and the potential of Adivasis mobilized within the revolution to create Indigenous political movements of their own making—in fact, this is one of the conclusions of the book (Shah 2019:267–269). I agree with Shakya that “Adivasi civilizational values should not be seen as static and in isolation from the ecosystem of the modern state and citizenry surrounding them, and the two should not be seen as simple binary opposites,” which is why *Nightmarch*’s central characters are as diverse as Kohli and Vikas, who came from the same Adivasi background but ended up in very different positions vis-à-vis the state and the forces of capitalism penetrating the countryside.

The comparisons to the Nepali Maoist movement that Shakya calls for in her comments are fascinating. My first preparatory project in 2008—before I embarked on the ethnographic research for *Nightmarch*—was to try to learn from anthropological scholarship on the Nepal case and encourage cross-country discussions (the result was a volume of *Dialectical Anthropology*; Shah and Pettigrew 2009). In later work, Feyzi Ismail and I directly compared the experience of the Nepali Maoists with that of the Indian ones with regard to the “Indigenous question” (Ismail and Shah 2015). We showed the ways in which the Nepal Maoist movement’s specific consideration of the national question within the Leninist tradition

directly impacted the rise of Janajati movements in Nepali politics, which did not have Indian parallels (Ismail and Shah 2015). Further comparisons with the Nepali Maoists are very necessary. I agree with Shakya, too, that the relationship between Maoism and authoritarianism and how it may be emerging now in Nepal (after the People’s War) will be an interesting future anthropological project. I agree, too, with Shakya’s call to treat seriously the political aspirations of our interlocutors. In my own case, this meant learning not only local languages but also the political language of my interlocutors (i.e., the language of the “modes of production” and “resolving the agrarian question”) that formed the basis of their strategy and analyzing that using their own tools through both my own field-based research (see Shah 2013a) and that of other scholars (see the edited selection Lerche, Harriss-White, and Shah 2013). I know not what Orwell would have made of the Naxalites—the question that Shore asks in his piece—but my purpose was indeed to provide both a very humane understanding of their leaders and foot soldiers and at the same time a dispassionate critique based on my ethnographic research to show the unintended ways in which they may undermine their own aims, how authoritarianism can seep into their own ranks.

Indeed, I deeply sympathize with Antonio De Lauri’s critique of the tyranny of the politically correct, the need to disagree and ask troubling questions. As far as research in general goes, anthropological dissidence suggests that studying the spread of right-wing forces around the world is as important as researching our would-be allies (Shah 2021). In the case of *Nightmarch*, I have tried, as McGranahan says, to reveal the contradictions that tie the insurgents to the world they seek to change and to speak truth to power, including truths that the insurgents hold from themselves and from society. But I do so in ways that I hope are sympathetic. As Raj acknowledges, the people I lived with were not just interlocutors or informants to me but also “fellow human beings who share concerns that are common to one another.”

I am glad that Raj finds that I am engaged in a continual process of decolonizing at multiple levels, for he is perhaps one of the scholars that I have learned the most from on this issue. I agree with Jalais that processes of decolonization must include engaging with the production of Black, Dalit, and queer feminist scholarship (although I would add, too, that of other subaltern groups, such as Indigenous people). As Raj highlights, though, what I try to do is point to the significance of examining oppressive contexts of postcolonial societies, including the emergence of local elites. These for me are not just Brahman elites but also capitalist elites arising from within subaltern groups. As *Nightmarch* shows, in the places where I conducted my research—Jharkhand—Adivasis themselves are being stratified and producing elites who are selling off the lands of their kin to multinational corporations, and we need to understand these processes and incorporate their analysis in our consideration of decolonization.

Decolonization can be empty if it does not also go hand in hand with a critique of capitalism—annihilation of caste-ethnic

hierarchies needs to be accompanied by that of class ones. This is why I have found particularly compelling the works of Dalit scholars like Anand Teltumbde (whom I mentioned above and who is now in prison), who have challenged both caste and class hierarchies, and why engagement with Teltumbde and his writings was so important to Jens Lerche and me in the research programs on Adivasis and Dalits in the belly of the Indian boom that we led at the London School of Economics (LSE) while I was writing *Nightmarch* (Teltumbde was an adviser for these programs). It is with this spirit of decolonization that we also created the Adivasi Fellowship Programme, in close consultation with and on the advice of established Indigenous and Dalit scholars in India, which brought early-career Adivasi scholars from central and eastern India to the LSE and School of Oriental and African Studies. Raj is correct that for decolonization there is also a need to translate such anthropological writings into vernacular languages (*Nightmarch* has so far been translated into Hindi and Bengali). So much more needs to be done at so many levels.

Let me turn to the wider context of the university, which Boyer and De Lauri rightly bring up. We may debate about the democratic origins of the university (Boyer is more optimistic than De Lauri, it seems). For my part, my essay was on the one hand in keeping with De Lauri's idea of the university as the space of the privileged. "Universities, as centers of knowledge production, were always tools of the state and corporations," I said, although I should probably have evoked monks in gowns too. At the same time, on the other hand, my essay was indeed in the very spirit that Boyer suggests—of reclaiming the universitas from administrators, audit procedures, and billionaire trustees to keep alive an enduring core of teaching and learning that harbors political possibility and protects dissidence.

The creation and expansion of dissident communities in the university must indeed take place across the board—from our teaching to the very way in which we are with one another both in and out of the classroom. Moreover, as Harney and Moten (2013), whom Boyer usefully evokes, say, study is what we do with other people, not just in the university but also at the barbershop (or hair salon!), on a porch, at a coffee table. The support of and solidarity with the organization of dissident practices in and out of academia are crucial. Within the university, as De Lauri notes, we can extend the discussion on dissidence to many forms of practices—videos, talks, policy briefs, and poetry, he mentions. I say in the essay,

We will all have our own approaches to channeling our dissidence. Writing is not the only form. Writing for wider publics is certainly not for everyone or for every instance of our writing. There is also teaching, hosting seminars, participating in discussion groups, signing petitions, marching in rallies, changing the field of scholarship, challenging public policy, using social media, contributing to radio and TV programs, turning our research into another form of art, curating exhibitions and public displays, and making documentaries. Some of us may do several of these things at the same time.

The discussion of all these various refuges of dissidence deserves much greater space than this modest essay, in which I chose to focus on a very specific form of writing, the writing of the books that are our ethnographies.

To end, let me clarify what Raj highlights: The suggestions for writing for wider publics that I make are distinct from the popular anthropological writing that simplifies, dumbs down, and exoticizes to reach the general reader. I am indeed arguing for the opposite—that we make space to find the creativity, language, and styles of writing that can make accessible the rigor of our scholarship to wider audiences without dumbing it down. Nurturing, developing, and creating space for writing that fully integrates academic and public debate addressing broad audiences, while also advancing scholarship, will enable us to break down some of the barriers between academia and the wider world. Yes, there will always be much that is beyond our control—"the market," for instance. Phenomenal breakthroughs may take place occasionally—for instance, Graeber and Wengrow (2021) recently trumping Diamond and Harari. But we do not all need to write bestsellers. Even little steps can make a big difference. Boyer suggests the idea of sustaining places of refuge. Making our scholarship more accessible, sharing it with people beyond our small disciplinary communities, and enabling others—including those we write about—to understand and use it, should they wish, are important steps toward the decolonization of academia.

—Alpa Shah

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