

Pandian, Anand. 2019. *A Possible Anthropology. Methods for Uneasy Times*. Durham, London: Duke University Press. 168 pp. Pb.: \$23.95. ISBN: 9781478003113.

Book review by

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The present time is a witness to uncertainties and upheavals caused by the social and political tensions on the one hand, and the ecological crisis widespread across the globe, on the other. Whether it is a natural calamity or socio-economic instabilities caused by the rise of repressive state agencies, anthropology as a discipline has responded to this phenomenon in its own ways. Seeing the human in relation to other terrestrial beings is a concern anthropology has raised since its inception. How does, then, anthropology carry on with this tradition of moral connection with other beings on the planet and what methodological promises does it make to comprehend the enterprise of humanity in contemporary times? Anand Pandian's, *A Possible Anthropology* is an ethnography gleaned through experiences of anthropologist ranging from canonical and marginal figures of ethnographic storytellers and contemporary scholars to the activists and artists engaged in the diverse field of inquiry.

Locating himself as an ethnographer amongst his colleagues, the author, in their company, revisits anthropology's ever-contested debate on the problems of method. Drawing on the philosophical roots of anthropology, the author reminds of the discipline's moral and intellectual capacity to sympathise with other living beings, beyond the human. It is through this concern of sympathy that the author elaborates on the concept of humanity through ethnographic practices of the anthropologists at work. Anthropology, in the author's judgement, is not merely about studying culture as an object of inquiry, but also a means of 'cultivation of humanity as a method of change' (p. 11). Three illuminating es-

says in this concise book preceded by an introduction and followed by a short critique (coda) are generously analysed and clearly explained by the author on the themes: specifically, the practice of empiricism in anthropology, ethnography as a method of experience and; finally, anthropology's discourse on humanity.

Collectively, these essays provide an empirical account on "problems of method" in anthropology. What is interesting in the author's approach is the experimentation with the experiences of the 'other' who engaged in the discipline 'ethnographically' rather than as a 'profession' (p. 10). For instance, drawing on the fieldwork and writing practices of Bronislaw Malinowski and Zora Neale Hurston, the author examines how one of them engaged with the discipline professionally and became a founding figure of scientific anthropology, whereas the other was drawn to the discipline through her fieldwork practices akin to the anthropological methods. It is through this thread of intellectual and emotional affinities author pursues amongst the present ethnographers, what he calls, 'a promise of experience' (p. 5) in anthropology.

Anthropology, as a practice, has undergone a significant change in recent times. The rise of far-right and illiberal politics across the globe and its consequences in socio-economic and ecological domains had a great impact on the pursuit of knowledge. Navigating back and forth through the experiences of the anthropologists, the author re-interrogates a debate Eric Wolf once induced regarding anthropology as a discipline. The question of what it means for anthropology to be 'the most scientific of humanities and the most humanist of the sciences' (p. 46) is critically examined. To bring light to this, attention is given to the ethnographers' experiences that are shaped by field uncertainties and accidents caused by national and political upheavals, including personal tragedies of the ethnographers. How such vulnerabilities in the field shape the ethnographers' lifeworlds towards their subjects and how such unusual field encounters remain a potential 'method of experience' (p. 46) in anthropology is a question upon which the book sheds light.

Drawing on notable anthropologists, namely—Claude Lévi Strauss, Michael Jackson, Jane Guyer, and Natasha Mayer—the author tries to convey that experience, though it is a core element in anthropological methods, it may not be an object of inquiry alone. What is rather crucial, he says, is to 'put experience into motion as both means and end of investigation' (p. 49). Closely observing the aforementioned anthropologists in their ordinary activities of reading, writing, teaching and fieldwork, the author investigates what experience has meant to anthropology and how it conceives 'a unity of approach' (p. 50) to comprehend the lifeworld in an uncertain time.

While returning to the theme of humanity, the author raises an important concern as to how anthropology undertakes the project of humanity both as a voice against injustices while also being “complicit” in injustices. With the emergence of ethnographers like Hurston as a black educator amidst widespread racism under colonial dominance from which even the academic spaces were not excepted, the author reminds readers of the discipline’s moral and political downside in the past and the way it continues at present. Ethnography, therefore, may enlarge the volume of knowledge production, but how far does it invoke human values in it is a concern at which the book invites attention. In this context, the author asks: how to re-imagine an anthropology that can ‘cultivate humanity’ even beyond the human subject—an anthropology that can ‘approach all beings as kin’ (p. 109). Furthermore, echoing Gerald Berreman’s words, the author maintains that anthropology is not merely about encountering the ‘truth’; it is rather about the ‘courageous exposition of the truth and to act upon the implications of that truth’ (p. 111).

The book is mainly an outcome of ethnographic experiences of the ethnographers from canonical figures to contemporary anthropologists. It offers a wider methodological vision, which the author illustrates as an ‘affirmative spirit of critique’ (p. 118). While relying explicitly on the anthropologies in Western academia, the author somehow tends to escape the anthropological practices in the vernacular. What is happening to anthropology in the far East, Eastern Europe or even Latin America, and how does it survive the linguistic and regional dominance within a continent (Laviolette et al., 2019; Eriksen, 2019)? What could be a possible way to converge the vernacular and “cosmopolitan anthropology” (Rapport, 2019)? That is a matter still awaiting attention. Nonetheless, the book provokes the students of anthropology to imagine a possible method and approach as a guide to building a new methodical vision. The book, thus, is a treatise on ethnographical practices and a methodological roadway to continue the intellectual tradition of anthropology both in “uneasy” times and otherwise.

References

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