



Improvising life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness: Anthropological perspectives

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ABSTRACT: This essay is based on the keynote address I presented on 25 April 2024 at SANT2024, the Swedish Anthropological Association conference on “Improvisation,” held at Uppsala University. I probe the idea of “improvisation” as it applies to understanding the human struggle to survive amid harsh conditions (improvising life), ways anthropologists are breaking free from constraints of standardised methods and means of communicating knowledge (improvising liberty), and how engaged anthropologists put knowledge to work in the effort to sustain the earth and the living things in it (improvising for the pursuit of happiness). Invoking aspects of my own work and that of other scholars, I offer an anthropological perspective on a process captured by the action word “improvising,” creating something new from what is available.

Keywords: improvising; exigencies; violence; writing otherwise; engaged anthropology; activism; academia

On Improvisation

Improvisation is a provocative word that brings immediate images to mind – brings immediate images to *my* mind. I think of spontaneous composition, like what a jazz pianist does. I think of Chicago’s clever Second City performers who do “improv” – they stand up and feed off one another to make hilarious, culturally resonant comedy. I think of the early generation of stand ups, entertainers like Anne Meara and Ben Stiller who began their careers at Chicago’s Compass Players, the predecessor to Second City, and whose improv sketches touched a chord, especially with diasporic Irish and Jewish American audiences.¹

I think of myself, standing in front of an audience, and know I dare *not* improvise the way those musicians and comedians do, so fearlessly. For example, I came prepared to SANT2024 having done my homework, having thought long and hard about what might be important to say about “improvisation,” the conference theme, and having stared at a blank page before tackling the composition of my remarks and appearing on stage ready with a script.

Improvisation is also a provocative *concept* that brings to mind ideas of making do, of innovating, of creating something using what is nearby, accessible. The Oxford English Dictionary backs me up on what improvisation as a word and as a concept brings to mind. The two main definitions of Improvisation are: first, composing or performing without

¹ See Tony Adler on “Improvisational Theater”; clips of Stiller and Meara are available online such as the skit, “Computer Dating” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H--kLKTGzaQ>), and the skit, “Wrong Phone Number” (<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=950837855768498>).

preparation; and second, the action of responding to circumstances or making do with what is available.

Responding to circumstances; making do with what is available. Is Improvisation like *bricolage*, a concept brought to anthropology by Claude Levi-Strauss in *The Savage Mind* (1966)? Sociologist Jules Zhao Liu (2024: 1, 18) offers that possibility, theorising that “Bricolage stems from the innovative capacities of human beings. It helps individuals to creatively solve practical problems [...] [It] is a generative principle of regulated improvisation responding to restrictive or limited conditions [...] an adaptive change responding to exigent circumstances.” In its broadest conceptualisation, *bricolage* sounds akin to improvisation. The *bricoleur* improvises using “whatever is at hand to make do with a problem” (Liu 2024: 2, quoting Levi Strauss 1966: 21).

If we think about improvisation as *bricolage*, however, there is a problem. Even as the concept of *bricolage* has been adopted in different ways by different disciplines, a common thread across them has to do with the goal of the innovation, adaptation, improvisation. As Liu (2024: 18) puts it, “the purpose of making change is to maintain overall consistency or structural stability.” If, as Levi-Strauss seems to have posited, *bricolage* can never fully rock the deep cultural structures embedded in human collective unconscious, then the main innovative drive remains tied to the structural status quo, not to contradict or undo its core rules.

It is a bit dizzying to grasp this notion for an historical materialist like me who asks: What are the exigent circumstances to which bricoleurs seek to creatively resolve? Perhaps the devil is in the details. More on this soon.

Meanwhile, with my attention focused on the word and the ideas, I start to see the multiple ways anthropologists invoke improvisation in their research and writing, and the complications they offer towards deeper understanding based on the situations they describe. For example, Eitan Wilf, in an ethnographic study of jazz educators at a U.S. jazz music college, observes a pedagogic approach involving students *imitating improvisations*, which, at first glance, sounds like an oxymoron. Wilf (2012: 32) explains that to learn to improvise, “the students produce precise replications of the recorded improvisations of past jazz masters and then play them in synchrony with the recordings.” Moving beyond the simple notion of improvisation as performance without preparation, Wilf reveals what he calls a common “misunderstanding about the nature of improvisation” (Wilf 2012: 33). It is never a “creation *ex nihilo*” (out of nothing), he observes, but “is a recombination of previously available building blocks created by other improvisers” (Wilf 2012: 40). Wilf titles his article, “Rituals of Creativity” to capture the idea that “imitation” and “creativity” are in dialectical relationship, generating the process we call improvisation.

It is beginning to fit together. The etymology of “improvisation” comes from the Latin *improviso* or “unforeseen,” “unexpected” according to the Online Etymology Dictionary (Harper n/dA). In etymological terms, the word “improvise” is linked to the word “provide” from the Latin “*providere*” that means “to look ahead, prepare, act with foresight” (Harper n/dB). We see in these etymological connections that spontaneity and preparedness are not opposites; they are always joined in dynamic relationship. In his essay titled “Improvisation,” professor and jazz pianist R. Keith Sawyer (2008: 121), affirms this dynamic that he sees as “between the social, conventional, and ready-made in social life and the individual, creative, and emergent qualities of human existence.”

It is not difficult to recognise the improvisational in the lives and works of anthropologists. Christina Wasson (2006) sees improvisation as a pattern in the stories of eleven women navigating to land a satisfying professional position in anthropology; Katherine Metzo (2021) sees it in the processes of conducting ethnographic research. Maybe a bit idealistically, Metzo claims that anthropologists “move nimbly because knowing the rules allows us to creatively push against boundaries [...] we riff off those who came before us,” she says, “in community with those who innovate alongside us.” For her, “The core value of ethnography is to improvise – to use our mastery of our craft to build on what came before, to make sense of it, and anticipate what comes next” (Metzo 2021: 346). As for responding to circumstance or making do with what is available, ethnographer Michael Degani explains how the urban precariat in Dar es Salaam are caught “in a permanent entanglement of work and play [...] consigned to permanent improvisation [that] engenders a social freedom that, in some respects, remains indistinguishable from constraint” (Degani 2018: 475, 495). Degani takes us through the contradictions, and the traps and freedoms experienced by his interlocutors who are freelance, urban electricians in Tanzania’s largest city.

As I have worked through these words and ideas, my appreciation for “improvisation” continued to grow, becoming more and more intellectually stimulating and exciting. In the process of arriving at my script, I riffed off the connections between various words and concepts and in the company of scholars who have explored dimensions of human behaviour amid social, cultural, environmental, political, and economic conditions.

Prior to my digging into it, the word inspired me to play on the three-part phrase “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” a motto from the U.S. Declaration of Independence familiar to Americans and many people around the world. Vague as it is, the phrase nevertheless suggests a principle. As a political tagline it is ideological and propagandistic, considering the history of U.S. imperialism and colonialism. As a principle, it captures an ideal to which people might aspire but have yet to achieve. In what follows, I invoke the phrase in part ironically, and mostly to probe specific meanings of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness in the present participle of the word improvisation; that is “*improvising*,” the verb tense that suggests ongoing action.

Improvising for life

“For *life*”: a phrase that might get philosophers into ontological debate about what constitutes being, existence, and aliveness, and into discussion on the epistemological roots and value of the life/death dichotomy. The phrase “for *life*” might be weaponised by certain politicians as an ideological tool to contain and control women who are too often stripped of the right to make decisions over their own bodies. For the purposes of my discussion here, and, again, from my historical materialist perspective, “for *life*” suggests a future orientation, endurance over and within an expected span of time. Adding the word “improvising” indicates action so that the notion of “*improvising for life*” is to help understand the human struggle to survive amid exigent circumstances.

Degani, the urban anthropologist working in Tanzania, made the observation that ethnographers often consider the creativity of urban life as “a kind of improvisation under conditions of adversity” (Degani 2018: 480). In such analyses, improvisation, as a word and as an idea, is akin to other words and concepts familiar to and invoked by anthropologists: adaptation; resilience; and agency. Under adverse conditions, people find ways to adapt

in order to survive or manage. Their inventive strategies indicate the human capacity to be resilient – as individuals and as cultural groups; that is, they are improvisers who show strength, inventiveness, creativity and thus, the ability to sustain and endure. People are never fully the victims of the structurally harsh conditions not of their own making but in which they find themselves. “Agency” suggests the power they have to effect control and in turn, arrive at a desired outcome. Not to be interpreted as free will, agency suggests there is some space in between limitations where individuals and/or groups show resilience as they improvise towards the desired end.

There are many examples from a vast array of anthropological studies that demonstrate these processes. The notion of “human adaptation” has a long history in the discipline, and as Donald Nelson and his co-editors of a collection of essays, make clear, “the term adaptation has become ubiquitous in the environmental and climate-change literature” (Nelson 2009: 271). They refer to “human adaptation” as a field itself, and highlight works by anthropologists who document what they call “local adaptations to climate variation and change” following in the tradition of Julian Steward’s early studies of cultural ecology (Nelson, West, and Finan 2009: 271-272).

In other domains, researchers invoke the ideas of “adaptation” and “resilience” to describe responses to emergent crises. For example, the authors of an article titled “Covid Connections” identified the attributes they consider “adaptive” as actors in a local food system responded to serve the needs of vulnerable residents in North Carolina during the pandemic. The authors consider that the specific ways people re-organised to deliver food under stressful conditions indicates the system’s “strength,” “flexibility,” and “growth” that in turn has implications for strengthening what they call “food system resilience in times of crisis and stability” (O’Connell et al. 2021: 124). In another example, anthropologist Karsten Paerregaard (2021) illustrates such resilience in an article on water management and ritual practice amid climate change in the Peruvian Andes. Paerregaard also offers important mention of anthropologist Roy Rappaport’s early notions of adaptation and human agency. He appreciates Rappaport’s concern with the dynamics between human groups and their animal, manmade, and natural environments, while recognising problematic assumptions underlying the notion of “adaptation” as operating in the interest of maintaining the ecological status quo (Paerregaard 2021).

Anthropologist Franz Krause (2022) offers critical insight about assumptions underlying the notion of adaption in an article based on ethnographic research among two indigenous groups in the Canadian Arctic (2022). He argues that terms like “change” and “resilience” can be analytically and politically misleading. For example, the word “resilience,” he notes,

usually refers to the attributes of a successful socioecological system in the context of disturbances (Folke 2006), and it thus retains a reference to a stable equilibrium. In the classic sense, resilience indicates the ease or speed by which a system can regain its former functioning after a disruption (Berkes and Ross 2013). Here, resilience is a system’s ability to reorganize an equilibrium, as indicated by popular terms like bouncing back or recovery. (Krause 2022: 11)

In the essay by Nelson, West, and Finan (2009) mentioned above, they warn against imagining that “adaptations” are panacea, always at the ready to bring solution to a crisis, especially in

the face of global climate conditions. Likewise, Krause posits that “change,” if understood as in contrast with “stability,” is problematic since stability does not reflect most peoples’ worlds, their circumstances [actually] marked by “perpetual and uncertain transformations” (Krause 2022: 7). He argues that under such ongoing, precarious, unpredictable, volatile conditions, people do not simply “adapt” to bring everything back to normal, but are constantly anticipating – always on their toes – showing flexibility, and *improvising*.

In her work on the 2017 Hurricane María in Puerto Rico, anthropologist Rosa Ficek makes clear there is no panacea; instead, there is struggle, and plenty of it on multiple levels—emotional, psychological, political, economic, and more. Focused less on the notion that people had to “adapt” to the circumstances amid the hurricane and its aftermath, Ficek discusses “strategies” they use to address, first, their basic needs and subsequently, how they might act to effect systemic change in the conditions of their lives (Ficek 2018). These strategies are not pre-planned but improvisations in the face of harsh conditions.

The “environment” in Ficek’s essay is not a given with all its natural and manmade parts well-balanced and in place before a disastrous event. So too, the “environmental crisis” in Ficek’s essay is not simply a disaster that comes sweeping across suddenly to wipe out people and their homes. Yes, people rallied “to compensate, however inadequately, for what was destroyed” (Ficek 2018: 103). Yes, they developed innovative strategies to get drinkable water, power, and means of transportation and communication. Yes, those who could, showed resiliency. But their actions were not simply “adaptations” to bring everything back to normal. Many died or fell apart, revealing that the expectation of individual or cultural resiliency all too often places an unfair burden on *them*. Importantly, Ficek’s study also focuses on the details of the exigent circumstances themselves, the specific context within which the people struggle to *improvise for life*, sometimes succeeding and sometimes not.

The disaster, she argues, “exposes pre-existing problems” even as the immediate cataclysm disrupts daily life, disproportionately impacting those at the margins (Ficek 2018: 102). And the pre-existing problems, in place in Puerto Rico before the wild hurricane blew in, are centred in the violence of the island’s colonial history and the current status of its people. Poverty, racialisation and dehumanisation meet infrastructure, colonialism and the state. How are people to adapt?

Ficek (2018: 109, 111) writes, “Something like the end of the world happened in Puerto Rico [...] an entire population was left to suffer and die.” Those who survived *improvised* to live in what she calls “a permanent state of normalized emergency” (2018: 102).

Something like the end of the world is happening right now in too many places to name. We might start with a top-10 list provided by the UN-endorsed The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED): Yemen, Sudan, The Sahel, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ukraine, Myanmar, Haiti, Mexico, the United States, and of course, Palestine, which topped their January 2024 watch list (ACLED 2024a; Mehvar and Khmour 2024).

Gaza..., an entire population is being left to suffer and die. Those who remain have been improvising for 77 years to live in “a permanent state of normalised emergency.” Today there are tens of thousands dead; those left are barely surviving.

We cannot talk about the human capacity to be flexible, inventive, creative, adaptable, or improvisational, without providing a full history of the contexts within which people – grouped, categorised, described, and defined – strive to live out their lives. And that history and that context cannot be divorced from understanding differential access to power and

resources that impact the local scenes of action. The exigent circumstances must be named and fully fleshed out, no matter how difficult or painful that may be – and no matter how hard powerful political actors try to suppress history and context.

As I revised this essay, first in August 2024, the circumstances in Gaza were this: Israel is now engaged in full out genocide of the Palestinian people in Gaza. As I make final changes to this essay in January 2025, the conditions in Gaza are beyond horrific. Israel’s military assault has left nearly 47,000 Gazans dead, most civilians and the vast majority women and children. As of December 2024, an estimated 17,000 children have been killed by Israeli bombardments with help from an enormous number of U.S. weapons of mass destruction, with at least 21,000 children missing (Palestinian Centre for Human Rights 2024; Reuters 2024; UN News 2024). The deadly military action has left ruined houses, destroyed hospitals, destroyed schools and universities, slaughtered humanitarian aid workers, doctors and nurses, professors, journalists, and resulted in an estimated 1.9 million displaced people (UNRWA 2025). By March 2024, nine months ago, there was an ever-growing number among the displaced struggling with life-threatening thirst, starvation and illness. By April, death by famine had set in. The number of dead under the rubble is unknown; the number of maimed children and adults beyond comprehension.² The death and destruction continue unabated to the day of this writing (Parker, Harb, and Mahfouz 2025).

These exigent circumstances must be named and documented. There is no dearth of evidence by journalists and scholars including many anthropologists and even the American Anthropological Association’s 2015 Task Force report, that traces the long history of Palestinian displacement, housing, and land loss alongside the ever-growing number and size of Israeli settlements, horrendous restrictions on movement, suppression of freedom of speech, deprivation of academic freedom, preventable adverse health and welfare outcomes, and outright discrimination (Pérez et al 2015; among many other works, see Allen 2020; Bishara 2015; Bornstein 2003; El-Haj 2003; Halper 2008).

These exigent circumstances must be named and documented even in the face of forces that have in the past, and are now actively silencing history and context by intimidation, name calling, and the threat of McCarthyism revived. It should be obvious that to be Jewish, as I am, is not the same thing as to be aligned with the state of Israel and political Zionism although that conflation, purposefully perpetrated by powerful ideologues and endorsed by powerful nations, is fast becoming institutionalised (Waterston 2024).

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The ethnographic examples I offer on “improvising for life” suggest that much of what anthropologists seek to understand has to do with the circumstances and conditions that constrain the fulfilment of human ideals, dreams, potential, and life itself. Under such conditions, however harsh these may be, many anthropologists do name and document the exigent circumstances to which people exhibit agency, adaptation, improvisation. Under impossibly brutal conditions, I have to wonder: is it enough that anthropologists name, document, and expose the long history of domination and ongoing destruction?

If it’s not enough, what then? The next section of this essay considers some of what

² In early July, *The Lancet* published an estimate of 186,000 as the likely number of actual Gazan deaths, directly and indirectly a result of Israel’s assault on Gaza since October 8 (Khatib et al. 2024).

anthropologists have been thinking about doing, and trying to do, in an effort to undertake more than just enough.

Improvising as liberty

Here, I turn to “improvising with liberty” to discuss ways anthropologists are breaking free from constraints of standardised methods and means of communicating knowledge, necessary if insufficient action in the endeavour to do more.

The academy has its rules; those of us who have spent our work lives in it, as well as those seeking a career in academia, have learnt the rules and how to follow them. Our scholarly disciplines have trained us in methods of gathering information and in analysing them. We have learnt to theorise and we have learnt a particular mode of conveying the knowledge we have acquired. I am not against this training as there is great value, of course, in learning how to acquire knowledge systematically. Yet, the academy can be a very conservative place, too often holding onto tradition for the sake of tradition, and too often requiring conformity not necessarily for the sake of learning but for the sake of reproducing what is familiar to those with the most influence within academic institutions.

At the same time, and in no small part due to the principle of academic freedom, the academy can also spawn those who break the rules. The best among the rule breakers are motivated by an interest in furthering understanding. Breakthroughs happen. Paradigm shifts happen. Going against the grain happens.

Over the past 40 years there has been a growing movement in anthropology to question the discipline’s foundational knowledge, the questions it considers important to pose, who holds the authority to represent anthropological knowledge, how that knowledge is acquired, interpreted, and represented, and what these issues have to do with systemic power dynamics in one’s field site, in academic institutions, and in the world. Given global inequities and consequent impact on local communities, those who would ignore these dynamics were and are called out for their blinders. Within the discipline, voices of feminist, Indigenous, and Black and Brown anthropologists whose writings were too often exiled from mainstream anthropology have slowly emerged from the shadows to make their mark. Not unrelated, some anthropologists began to question the discipline’s disengagement from the public sphere that marked post-World War II anthropology, at least in the United States (Kirsch 2018). They have called one another to task for failing to venture beyond the narrowest confines of the ivory tower to engage with the world.

Alongside, there has also been a major shift in how anthropologists view and value the matter of communicating anthropological knowledge through writing and other, multimodal forms, the focus of my remarks here.

These interconnected discussions have led to the current exciting moment when anthropologists are paying careful attention to experimental writing and multimodal practices that amplify narrative voices in the dissemination of knowledge, and facilitate interaction with increasingly diverse target audiences. In my view, the growing number of junior scholars experimenting with experimental, multimodal practices is a testament to the impact of these decades-long conversations, and the openings forged by those who are now senior scholars. In turn, junior scholars are showing the academic establishment the value to the discipline of these efforts (Baines and Costa 2022; Cahnmann-Taylor and Jacobsen

2024; van Roekel and Murphy 2024).³

My own work fits into these discussions and the wonderful moment. I dare say I have had a part in these conversations and in the production of works of anthropology designed to participate in public discourse on critical issues. Over the years, I have worked solo on various writing projects – experimenting and innovating – and I have worked alongside colleagues with whom I share sensibility and commitment to “writing otherwise,” Ulf Hannerz’s phrase (2016). Among them are Fran Mascia-Lees, Carole McGranahan, Fiona Murphy, Carolyn Nordstrom, Anand Pandian, Paul Stoller, Maria Vesperi, and Helena Wulff, all whose writings I find beautiful, powerful, and accessible. I am quite certain that each of them, like myself, have improvised to make way into new territory in writing anthropology.

In reflecting on my own writing process and habits, I see that my improvisations are not “creations *ex nihilo*” but rooted in the discussions I have outlined above. I have built my experiments in “writing anthropology otherwise” on a series of intellectual concerns and conversations, sociocultural formations, and political circumstances and events. I have built my writing practice sometimes by imitating authors I admire, often by consciously “knocking a host of academic critics off my shoulder.” I have also built my writing practice by following a strict, self-imposed schedule, making sure I carve out the time to write, no matter how much I may not want to!

“Knocking a host of academic critics off my shoulder” is a line from an essay by Carolyn Nordstrom (2009: 35) titled “The Bard,” and it is published in an anthology of writing I co-edited with Maria Vesperi. That book, published 16 years ago, is one among a growing number of books, articles and blogs on writing anthropology, on the writer in the anthropologist, on the anthropologist as writer, and on featuring experimental writings, some brilliant and inspiring, and some that fall flat.

In reflecting on my efforts to free myself from the real and imaginary critics on my shoulder, I early on rejected opaque academic language, which too often seemed designed to impress, intimidate, or confuse rather than to clarify. I would write differently, I promised myself, no matter what happened to me, career-wise.

Scanning my memory and the books I have written, I see the ways I broke rules for the sake of the art of writing and to express also what I needed to, in the spirit of Irma McClaurin’s understanding that as anthropologists, “We hold in our words, real people’s lives” (McClaurin 2009: 123). I remember sitting alone in my home-office to write a book of urban poverty based on my research in New York City, improvising as I crafted portraits of each of the women at the center of the study, and thus, the book. One book reviewer asked, in so many words, “Where’s the theory?” Theory was there, in what Carole McGranahan names “theoretical storytelling” (2020). In my narrative, the reader would not be hammered over the head with lofty abstractions. I titled the book, *Love, Sorrow and Rage*, three words that imply that this book would break tradition by highlighting emotions even as it conforms to the academic convention of a three-word book title! (Waterston 2009).

Many years later, artist Charlotte Corden and I improvised as we made our way to create what became the graphic novel, *Light in Dark Times* (Waterston and Corden 2020). We did not know one another prior to this project, and neither of us had ever done anything

³ For some recent examples, see Creative Anthropologies Network: <https://www.easaonline.org/networks/can/>; Cool Anthropology: <https://www.coolanthropology.com/>; and Otherwise Magazine: <https://www.otherwisemag.com/magazine>.

like this before. She, the illustrator-fine artist, and I, the anthropologist-writer. After some false starts working at a distance, Charlotte left her home in the UK to live with me in New York. A lecture I had presented became the basis of the graphic novel. From there and with that material, we fumbled in the dark to imagine, create, and craft the book. We invented a process, setting up shop in my home basement, taping a long roll of art paper along four walls that became the storyboard.

In field notes I wrote during the course of our project, I hear ways “improvising” can be freeing with remarkable results. Even as I never use the word “improvisational” in these notes, it is clear that Charlotte and I gave ourselves that liberty:

We’ve been working intently and intensely. It’s an incredible experience, which I can’t explain in a short note. Some snippets might give a taste: deep diving into and discussing/deliberating/explaining each word, sentence, paragraph, figuring out meanings, imagining visual representations/the just-right image; it’s a dance; there’s disagreement and epiphany, tension and talking it all out sometimes gently, sometimes not so; there’s frustration, and great joy, an incredible intimacy/bond, a joining of the minds and hearts; a creative process like no other I have ever experienced. Age differences, generation differences, experience differences, cultural differences, belief differences; like-mindedness’s, personality similarities, ability to be utterly honest and utterly direct with one another; overcoming obstacles; ability to come out the other end all the better personally, intellectually, creatively.

I have found much is to be gained as an anthropologist who has pushed against convention. Fran Mascia-Lees’ words resonate with me when, in personal correspondence, she said that for many of us, the art of writing differently is a political act. Still, given the state of the world, it is important to again ask: is that enough?

Improvising for the pursuit of happiness

Happiness suggests contentment, not pure pleasure or a constant state of joyfulness. Even as I have much contentment in my privileged, personal life, I also look onto the world and see too much preventable sorrow and grief. The artist Philip Guston asks, “The war [...] the brutality of the world. What kind of man am I, sitting at home, reading magazines, going into a frustrated fury about everything – and then going into my studio to adjust a red to a blue?” (Guston 2024). Likewise, I ask myself, “The war [...] the brutality of the world. What kind of person am I, sitting at home, reading the newspapers and the ethnographies, going into a frustrated fury about everything – and then going to my computer to adjust a word or a phrase?”

In these desperate moments, I again turn to anthropologist Carolyn Nordstrom, who for decades has been my muse, inspiring my work in anthropology, and even how I want to live my life. She once wrote:

We all, as humans, have a responsibility to creatively offer something to the world. Not more than one person can. Just our bit. Creativity [...] takes meaning only when it adds to the sum of our humanity. (Nordstrom 2009: 37)

If improvising is about taking creative action in response to circumstances, what is it we anthropologists are to do? According to human geographers Ian Shaw and Mary Waterstone, “Our task is to build, craft, sew, engineer, cook, fix, grow, plumb our way to more dignified worlds. This is no small task” (Shaw and Waterstone 2019: 108).

In my view, there are three aspects to “the pursuit of happiness”: First, the pursuit requires diagnosing what makes for despair, hopelessness, and destruction for individuals and for the billions of human lives “dispossessed of land, livelihoods, and dignity” (Shaw and Waterstone 2019: 2). Knowing this, in turn, informs the second aspect: what needs to be reimagined and reorganised in order to bring about joyfulness, promise, and sustenance to the earth and the living things in it? Third, given our individual talents and skills, and the forums and platforms available to us, what tasks can we take on to contribute to a more dignified world?

As scholars, we are practiced in diagnosis. Individual works and the collective body of knowledge produced by anthropologists and scholars in related disciplines, are replete with information that helps identify sources of the ills we observe in the world. The knowledge is there even if there are censors who, by benign neglect or outright suppression, try to keep it out of the public conversation.

The knowledge is there even if, too often, author-scholars use obtuse language, making it difficult to pull out the gems. Given the state of the world, there is urgency to making such knowledge accessible through our writings and other formats. This urgency is my main motivation for creating the graphic book, which is reaching more readers than any of my other books.

It is also a main motivation for my breaking the rules, going against convention, pushing disciplinary boundaries, and rebelling against scholarly narrative style to co-create the genre “intimate ethnography” in which I conducted research and wrote the story of my father’s life history that is also a critical social history (Waterston 2024). That I centered my own father as subject of an anthropological work was an unusual move that might have brought harm to my professional reputation given the very personal nature of the project. By the time I embarked on it, I chose not to worry about Nordstrom’s real or imagined critics. I wanted to write an ethnography of violence, a book that would draw readers into a compelling account of one man’s movements across a brutal history, illuminating along the way the specific ideological and systemic forces implicated in his story that have resonance for contemporary social conditions and dynamics. Given the condition of ubiquitous violence in the contemporary world, I felt that sense of urgency to do the research, develop the genre, and write the book.

Yet it is not enough to be knowledge experts. In my view, we need to take that knowledge and put it to work. After all, we are all living in a precarious world, and that includes the disproportionate number of scholars themselves living in precarity because of the state of academic employment today. Changing the world is not merely an academic exercise; it is an imperative, especially considering the kinds of “exigent conditions” referenced throughout this essay.

It is not surprising that people often seem at a loss about what is to be done to effect substantive change, leaving them in despair. Having experienced this sense of despair myself, I find strength in the words and works of social justice advocates like the activist Mariame Kaba who declares, “hope is not a fuzzy feeling [...] it is a discipline ... it matters to believe

that it's possible to change the world [...]. We don't live in a predetermined, predestined world where nothing we do has an impact. Change is, in fact, constant" (Kaba 2020).

To sustain hope requires imagining an alternative world, and to be specific about "what kind of world we want, what kinds of productive relations we want, and what it actually takes to achieve them in the face of extremely powerful opposition" (Marcetic and Smith 2019).

I believe many anthropologists do know what kind of world they want and are doing their bit to achieve it, taking on tasks. Yet, they rarely acknowledge the significance of their contributions because, too often, they do not see how their work – whether in the field itself or activities outside it – *combine* as a larger effort to effect positive social change. I believe we need to acknowledge that this *is* what we *are* doing, and that we are a powerful creative force. The works of anthropologists who are participant-observers of the ways people all over the world improvise for life, those who push against convention, liberating themselves to innovate and improvise, and those who put hope to work in the pursuit of social justice towards "happiness" by means of local and global activist collaboration – taken together, this work and these anthropologists reflect participation in collective struggle.

They – we – are doing the work, day-in-and-day-out, most often without recognition in the mainstream media or popular culture, and sometimes – all too often – suppressed by extremely powerful opposing forces. I say: let us claim the struggles of which we are a part and let us claim the positive contributions that we make – by improvisation or by any other means.

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