FROM BASEMENT TO DE-BASEMENT? A PROBING RESPONSE TO OPACITY

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"The opaque is not the obscure" (Glissant 1997: 191). So begins Fran Martínez' text on basements, which he approaches as spaces of opacity that can nonetheless be entered ethnographically.

The apparent paradox that Martíez sets up appears to be a problem with relations of power, wrapped up in the expressly visual coding of "observer" and "observed". As inherently dark places, basements present a particularly fertile ground for exploring and reversing these relations, and – I suggest – for challenging our own ethnographic reproduction of language that links the ability to see with knowledge possession.

Basements as places that reveal through their withholding: one might assume that on entering such reticent spaces, the ethnographer's job would be to find the means for "illuminating" objects and social relations, bringing them "to light". But this is not what Martínez is proposing. Instead he offers opacity as "a medium that resists the light of (Western) understanding in order to preserve diversity". How, then, to probe the shadowy spaces of others without rendering them transparent? The compound noun "cellar door" comes to mind as a sympathetic point of entry. Regarded by many as the most satisfying English phrase purely in terms of its sound, "cellar door" creates an aperture into the darkness and slowness of basements that also pays heed to the underground's recalcitrance[1].

Figures 1 and 2 – stills from the film *Earth Swimmers*

1 Available at < https://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/14/magazine/14FOB-onlanguage-t.html#:~:text=The%20fantasy%20writer%20J.%20R.%20R.%20Tolkien,often%20given%20credit%20for%20it > (last consulted in February 2024).

In response to Martínez' critique of hypervisibility as a normalising force and his call for re-training our embodied practices of attention, I'd like to propose three further lines of inquiry into the opaque:

i. a recrafting of "participant observation" into "observer participancy";
ii. a shift away from visual towards sonic modes of encounter and description;
iii. an ethics of reciprocal (de)basement; of mutual unboxing in the context of ethnographic encounter.

Regarding the first point, basements are places where things are stored, stashed and possessed, and places where one becomes vulnerable to possession by one's stashed away things. Basements fill with objects that take on lives of their own – possessions and associated rituals whose potency ferments like illicit moonshine. The traditional anthropological method of participant observation breaks down in this context, not only because the conditions for visually-coded observation are blatantly absent in the dark, but also because basements are themselves, as Martínez puts it, "opaque" accumulations of traces and layers: their interiority resists exposure, and through this resistance their contents become charged. With opacity, therefore, comes agency and enchantment – in Alfred Gell's idiom, aesthetic power which intensifies by the *in*ability to trace or comprehend the techniques of its production (1999). Basements vibrate with the potential to debase conventional relations, including those between the observing anthropologist and the nonhuman field of observation – things that are stored in basements take on an uncanny ability to observe us back. In quantum mechanics, "observer participancy" refers to the ability for observation to change its subject of attention and vice-versa; that is, the observer creates and is created by her local reality (Frieden 1998; Pitty 2000). In short, our basements make us just as we make them. With this in mind, "observer participancy" more aptly describes anthropological encounters in opaque spaces than "participant observation". In basements, as Alberto Corsin-Jiménez (2015) writes of other creative autonomous zones, we are "called forth into existence. We are experimented into the world".

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As Martínez suggests, basements are theatrical spaces in which their occupants find themselves free to explore obsessions, perversions and expressions of radical difference. Basements are also productive places for reimagining what anthropology itself might be (a dark anthropology?), because in the absence of vision, alternative modes of sensing and knowing the world are drawn to the fore.

I recently made a "dark film" myself in collaboration with a professional mole catcher (Spriggs 2021).[2] I tasked myself to use my camera (my tool for observational capture) in a way that responded and adapted to Nigel's own set of tools and techniques for accessing the subterranean world of the mole. This mimesis worked while I tracked his above-ground movements, assessing the arrangement of molehills and feeling with his heel for the subtle "give" in the earth that signifies a mole's underground tunnel. But then Nigel used his mole catcher's probe (a long, slim, metal pole with a bulb at one end) to penetrate the run, gleaning tactile, vibratory knowledge of the soil's composition and the depth and direction of the tunnel. At this point the ground's surface blocked my camera lens, and the mole's world retreated into obscurity. I responded by revising my toolkit and came back with my own form of probe, a contact microphone made from a small piezo plate that picks up sonic vibrations directly from the earth.

Rays of light bounce off a surface, sound travels through. And while things can be seen in an instant, sonic perception occupies time. Sounds travel through things (soil, rocks, traps), and the materials they pass through infect their sonority such that sounds become carriers for nonhuman "voice". And while distance is necessary for visual comprehension, sonic vibrations enter the body with an intimacy akin to touch. Attending to things acoustically therefore slows down observation, "cultivating or enriching time" and "returning sensation" (see Martínez, in this volume) by attuning the listening body in new ways. This affects the observer/prober's perspective to such a degree that subject-object relations form in an altogether different way (see Spriggs PhD thesis, forthcoming).

In the vibratory world of mole catching, "deep listening" (*cf*. Oliveros 2005) reveals an animated landscape of more-than-human subjects, mutually tracking and responding to each other in "a skilful oscillation between openness and closure, refusal and engagement" (Martínez *ibid*). Sacrificing my own visually-oriented toolkit in order to lean into this language of vibration granted me partial access to the mole's own dark cosmology. I followed Nigel as an anthropologist of Other Animals, attendant to nonhuman worlds that retain their right to opacity (as Nigel says, moles "can never really be known"), but can nonetheless be entered and felt (Spriggs *ibid*).

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Watching Urlich Seidl's film[3] makes me feel like a mole – the creepy kind that spies. But in the long frontal shots of this documentary portrait of Austrian

2 Hermione Spriggs, 2021, *Earth Swimmers*.
3 *In the Basement (Im Keller)*, 2014.

basement culture, Seidl's protagonists seem completely at ease with the turning inside-out of their own private spaces, their most intimate rituals meeting the camera's unflinching gaze. A victim of domestic abuse is shown in her basement enacting an elaborate BDSM relationship. "It sets my mind free," she explains during a frank and frontal interview in which she speaks naked whilst tightly bound in rope. In another vignette, a woman cradles and coos at a naturalistic newborn doll that she lifts from a cardboard box amidst dozens of other boxed-up sleeping babies. In a third, a grey-haired man toasts to the Third Reich in his museum of Nazi paraphernalia. After the film I'm left with a sense that I've seen far too much of these people's hidden lives, their opacity compromised, without any reveal of the filmmaker's own. And yet, as the BDSM protagonist states, her debasement is a form of personal liberation that could only take place in the basement, thanks no doubt to its withdrawal from the gaze of the outside world. The right to both debasement and opacity is negotiated in the tensions that Seidl sets up. As a hinge between the public and private, inside and out, the basement presents as a "knot" of non-Euclidean space (Kuchler 1999; Le Guin 1982): it is host to that "which cannot be reduced" (Glissant *in* Martínez in this volume).

Martínez' own relation to his basement is arguably missing from his text. That said, the idea of turning out my own boxed-up histories in this context makes me cringe. Unpacking our vulnerabilities and intimate obsessions is not what we're taught to do as anthropologists, such that doing so here feels like a taboo. Do we as researchers also retain a right to our opacity, as Martínez claims? Or is mastering the art of self-exposure a discomfort we should practise on an ethical basis if we seek to attend to the basements of others (Martínez in this volume, *c.f.* Donald 2012)? Could controlled practices of personal de-basement offer liberation within academic contexts that remain awkwardly bound to homogenising forms of knowledge production?

To push this a little further: might assuming the researcher's own right to opacity in fact foreclose an ethical responsibility, even unwittingly reproduce a form of hegemony and/or repression, if we take stock of the ethnographic truth presented here that basements themselves tend toward debasement – "de" meaning both "from the bottom/below", but also "right to the bottom", as in "totally" or "completely"?[4] What does it mean to cling to the opaque when the completion of basement is in fact a de-basement, when basement (noun) and debasement (verb) are knotted together, holding down while emptying out, creating spaces of freedom through underground exposure?

What sort of dark, vibratory places might host this kind of anthropological transformation?

4 Available at < https://www.etymonline.com/word/de > (last consulted in February 2024).

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