ALL THAT WAS NOT HER

TODD MEYERS

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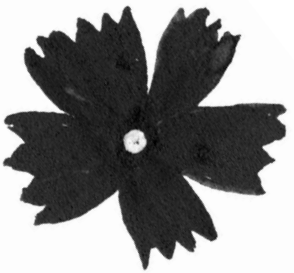
CRITICAL GLOBAL HEALTH Evidence, Efficacy, Ethnography
A series edited by Vincanne Adams and João Biehl



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for Pamela

CONTENTS

UNDOING

What follows is an essay about the undoing of an anthropologist who was undone alongside a woman he knew, or tried to know. It is the record of an ending; a test of what one can say or do in the aftermath of an end. She was ill; those around her were ill. He attempted in a small but purposeful way to record the moments in which she unraveled, physically and psychically, and rarer moments when she pulled together. Years passed. The relationship soured. Time is central to this story but not to its length—moments are indiscriminate, shaken from their place along a

continuum. Still, it took him a long time to recognize the accumulation of failure. He says this knowing just how phony it must sound. And he may be a phony, but not a modest one. Modesty has no value for the anthropologist, whose discipline requires him to perform virtue and assert truth even while claiming uncertainty and worry. There is certainty here and the wholeness of ruination.

Boo hiss, the final word offers such little satisfaction.

The inventory of minor happenings in the other global South.[1]

A career in the human sciences made in a hollow space.

1

THESE MOMENTS FORMED BETWEEN US

I've planned to meet Beverly at her house in the early afternoon. I call to make sure she's home—I'd made the long drive across Baltimore many times before only to be greeted by an unanswered knock at the door or a family member who tells me she's gone elsewhere.

Her son answers the phone and explains that his mother was taken by ambulance to the hospital the night before, after his grandmother found her unconscious on the bathroom floor. He says her condition is bad. He suggests I pick him up so we can go to the hospital together.

I let panic set in.

When we arrive, Beverly's mother is asleep on the bed. Beverly sits in a chair, one arm attached to an IV and the other outstretched, absently picking at food on a cafeteria tray. She's watching the television that hangs high on the wall above her. It takes her a few seconds to notice us before she turns to us and answers a question I'm only thinking: "You should have seen me yesterday." She tells her son to start packing up. Her mother, now awake, staggers into the bathroom and washes her face. Beverly asks, rhetorically, whether I drove.

Within moments we are walking down the hallway. I amble next to Beverly, holding her arm while she holds a catheter bag, some paperwork, bottles and envelopes of medications, and her coat. On the other side, Beverly's son steadies his mother and grandmother, their arms linked. We are a mismatched chain of paper dolls. Beverly's son carries a clear plastic bag containing pajamas, a hospital robe, and uneaten food items. I feel embarrassed and anxious as we fumble toward the exit. I'm uncertain whether Beverly has been discharged from the hospital; I'm uncertain if my arrival was planned by her or just her first opportunity to bolt. I don't ask. Complicit, I am her getaway. I feel duped by the urgency conveyed to me by her son. But mostly I am irritated because I sense that Beverly has taken advantage of me.

We have been here before.

As I drive I turn to Beverly, who sits next to me in the passenger seat, and ask if we can "try not to make this a habit."

Even now I am not exactly sure what I meant, or rather what I hoped to gain; I only know that my irritation had turned to condescension. Looking straight ahead, she says flatly, "This life is a habit. You get used to it."

So much of my time with Beverly felt

repetitive, even mundane, but the monotony

was continually punctured by moments of

crisis that were hypervolatile.

Life seemed to march steadily on, for better or worse, and then suddenly we were spun around, facing a different horizon. These moments swallowed everyone and everything around Beverly. No one was spared: not me, not her. Crisis would return to her, an awful cycle that brought with it doubt and distrust.

There was certainly nothing untrue about the crisis that led to her being hospitalized. Later she would tell me about the days of dizziness and clouded thoughts that culminated in her collapse. But the tentacles of

falsehood grew from it all the same, ensnarling and smothering its truth. Hospital staff would come to regard her as a pariah. Her son would make apologies. I would lose faith. She would weather their scrutiny and mine. These were little moments of injury, strung together; events that seemed to lay traps for thinking, moments that made it hard to find the right register for apprehending the force of what was happening to her. Or worse, these little moments invited misinterpretation, burying their corrosiveness in misunderstanding; moments that created an opening for some false lesson to be made from this woman.

The following chapters are a record of these moments, of their withering force; an essay about the consuming power of these moments written by a young white anthropologist who followed a middle-aged Black woman and her family for years. In his writing, this younger man now meets his older self at a different political moment, looking back through a distorted lens. Return, here, is itself an action of change, a deformation, and an acknowledgment of that change. I return to write about illness and other injuries not to explain them but to unthread them, or better still, to unravel clues about how they came to be lived as they were lived, how they entangled Beverly and me.

I am also engaged in another kind of unthreading. I direct this essay against a galling, late liberal project that would maintain a set of abstract principles about how things are or how one should be in relation to others—a project that at its core wrongly assumes all forms of living are somehow already known or played out. I refuse to rob living of its terrible inventiveness. If anthropology arranges its politics to counter narratives that demean and vilify, then in equal measure anthropology should admit the danger of cheap moralisms. By unthreading moments, I am looking for something in my encounters with Beverly that is difficult to name. I focus on small, intimate moments of contact and abrasion that offer, at least for me, a way to open and move within a critique of power that flows between two people in order to show, as Elizabeth A. Povinelli suggests, how "the critique of power might impact at a deeper, richer level with immanent forms of social obligation beyond given articulations of identity."[1] By returning to these moments

between us—moments that are fine and dense and largely insignificant in some larger scheme—I hope to show what the terms of social obligation expose in their unmaking, expressed by the lack of givenness between Beverly and me.

Beverly and me.

"How does one inhabit these more awkward worlds of obligation and analyze the differentials of power shooting through them?"[2]

Indeed. Gone is my sense of how things are meant to go. I had no idea what shape this inquiry would take as it took shape, and even now, its form—in the text and in the reception of the text—is uncertain. This is not a problem of authorship in pursuit of objectivity or the generalization of knowledge; rather it is the epistemological character of arranging words and events with feltness and memory. My challenge, as an actor and author, has been to track this arrangement, wherever it leads.

The minutes and hours we were together, the textual record of that time in my notes, and the faulty memory that wishes to transform touch and old words into new words on the page cannot be taken for granted—two people who were different in so many ways, two people who shared something between them, who inexplicably returned to each other again and again. She entered the relationship differently than I, and she would surely see me differently now. I entered, too, but in order to take her in, to see her, as Stephen Best writes, I had "to enter through a different door."[3]

Beverly's life was a habit. I followed her, habitually. I do not have to guess where the power to think *habitually*—to take up residence in another's life and to repeat that action of habitation over and over, to possess the power to leave or stop or to take an altogether different path—comes from. I also do not have to guess from where the constraint Beverly felt derives. It is a power generated by race and infinite strata of differences and inequalities, "rooted in the material conditions in which those inequities thrive."[4] It strikes me now that in all my years of following Beverly through medical environments, my access was never questioned, not once. I belonged. It strikes me now how many times I watched as security guards asked Beverly to show them the contents of her bag or chided her for being late or early. She belonged to these places, not to possess but to be possessed; she needed, and that need constrained her and was exploited by others.

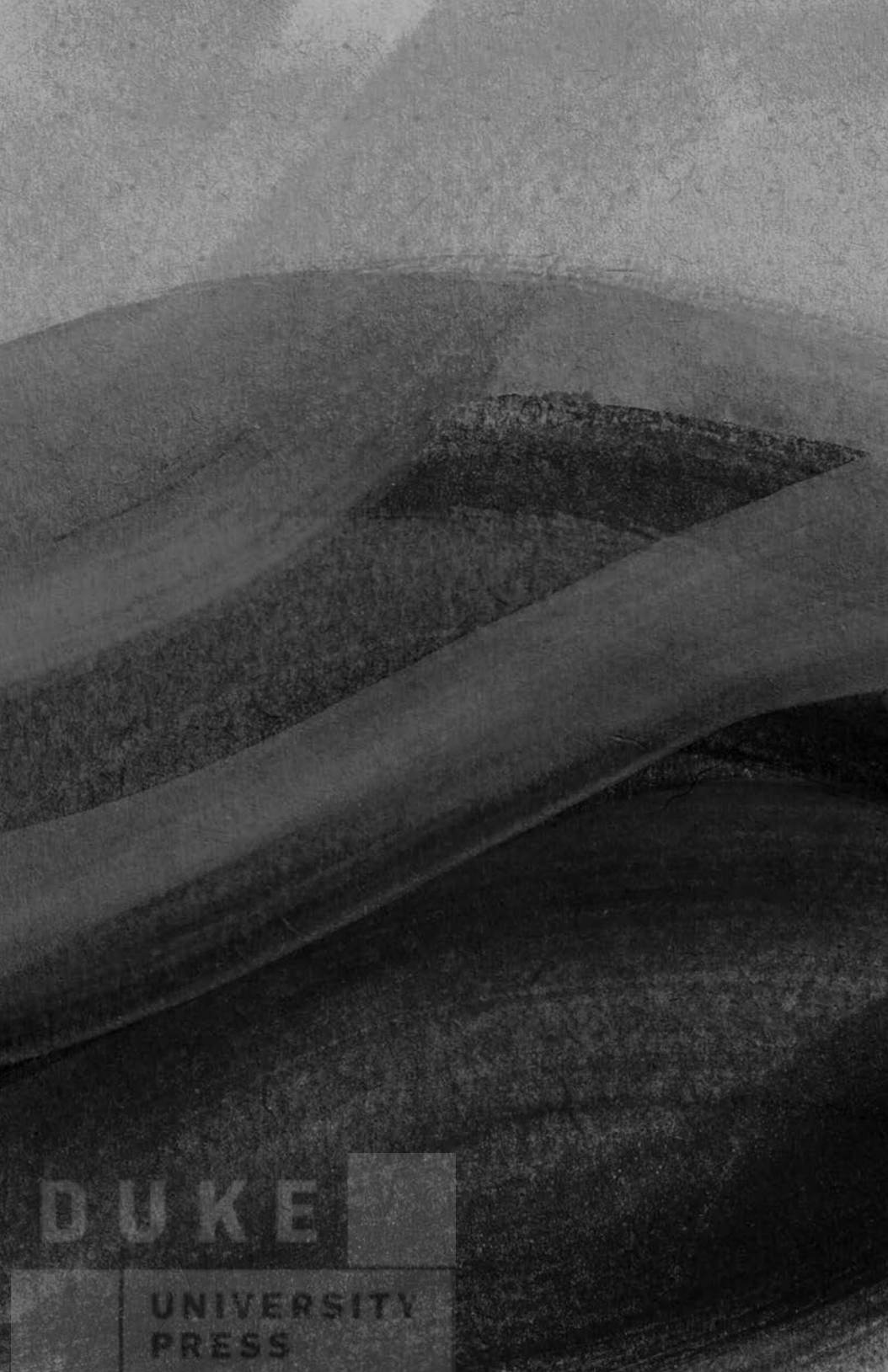
Beverly knew the scrutiny of others. But Beverly invited me in again and again, to bear the intimacy of scrutiny.[5] It is impossible for me not to think of Beverly when reading the following passage from Audre Lorde: "As we learn the intimacy of scrutiny and to flourish within it, as we learn to use the products of that scrutiny for power within our living, those fears which rule our lives and form our silences begin to lose their control over us."[6] Despite injury and insult, Beverly found a form in which to flourish, knowing only too well the intimacy of scrutiny. I witnessed the unharmonious and threatening reality of this flourishing, and my effort to record and engage it feels both weak and necessary. Her effort to communicate and direct my record feels both tenuous and vital. Chris-

tina Sharpe describes this vitality-in-being in a way that drains it of any passivity: "Black being that continually exceeds all of the violence directed at Black life; Black being that exceeds that force."[7] My account is a pale record of this violence and what launches from it. I grab at small bits of its evidence whizzing past in the tempest of that wild and deliberate force, in one life.[8]

In the case of a life.

The case is a distillation not of many worlds but of a world: the case breaks the smooth tension on the surface of a world seen from above; it is a method of agitating as much as looking, diving in where one sees no bottom.[9] The question of the individual, situated in time but out of step with its familiar cadence; a subject at once the center of clinical and experimental knowledge and pushed to a margin by the mess of living—these are aspects of the intellectual labor of ethnography. My concern with a life, one marked by the real threat of persistent, unrelenting

chronic illness, is bounded by the reality of precarity and harm that derive from racism and other prejudices found in the everyday of the world in which Beverly lives. There is nothing neutral in looking back at these moments. What I seek to avoid is "looking through a racially impervious lens" that would ignore the shape of these inequities; at the same time, I seek to avoid conjuring racial tropes.[10] I seek to write the negative without vandalizing it. So clear in our present political moment is how easily racialized fantasies work their way into the representation of Black lives, even or especially in the face of so much struggle.[11] There are failures in the project of late liberalism that we must get into; we must find ways into their unease and contaminating mess. My approach is to use an intimate and frank register to examine those failures, to consider the way they take up residence in lives and how we might exceed them. I ignore the empty promise of an ethics of encounter that is already worked out in advance, removed from Beverly, yet would seek to explain her. The essay risks itself in order to open such a critique. I rely warily on difference; I move within it in order to thwart, as Audre Lorde puts it, a "total denial of the creative function of difference" that would prevent us from saying something, anything, of consequence.[12]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She was there whole, looking exactly as she had at the beginning, capable of the same actions and no more, having the same name, the same habits, the same history. Yet, freed from the block, the relations between her and everything which was not her had changed. An absolute yet invisible change. She was now at the center of what surrounded her. All that was not her made space for her.

JOHN BERGER, *Bento's Sketchbook*

NOTES

UNDOING

1. Todd Meyers and Nancy Rose Hunt, "The Other Global South," *Lancet* 384, no. 9958 (2014): 1921–22. In the essay we ask how a city like Detroit, which in so many ways reflects the concerns of other cities in the so-called global South, somehow sits uncomfortably within the logics of global humanitarianism and medical concern. We wrote about Detroit because we were in Detroit at the time, but Baltimore in its own way raises a similar set of questions, connected through histories of violence and inequality; see also Samuel Kelton Roberts Jr., *Infectious Fear: Politics, Disease, and the Health Effects of Segregation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996); W. Michael Byrd and Linda A. Clayton, *An American Health Dilemma: A Medical History of African Americans and the Problem of Race, Beginnings to 1900* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Keith Wailoo, *Pain: A Political History* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014); Harriet A. Washington, *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Doubleday, 2006); Alondra Nelson, *Body and Soul: The Black Panther Party and the Fight against Racial Discrimination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011); and Rana A. Hogarth, *Medicalizing Blackness: Making Racial Differences in the Atlantic World, 1780–1840* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

1. THESE MOMENTS FORMED BETWEEN US

1. Elizabeth A. Povinelli and Kim Turcot DiFruscia, "A Conversation with Elizabeth A. Povinelli," *Trans-Scripts* 2 (2012): 83; see also Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

2. Povinelli and DiFruscia, "Conversation with Elizabeth A. Povinelli," 83.

3. Stephen Best, *None like Us: Blackness, Belonging, Aesthetic Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 29.

4. Rachel R. Hardeman, Eduardo M. Medina, and Rhea W. Boyd, "Stolen Breaths," *New England Journal of Medicine* 383 (2020): 197–99; see also Dereck W. Paul Jr., Kelly R. Knight, Andre Campbell, and Louise Aronson, "Beyond a Moment—Reckoning with Our History and Embracing Antiracism in Medicine," *New England Journal of Medicine* 383 (2020): 1404–6.

5. Sara Ahmed, "Introduction," in Audre Lorde, *Your Silence Will Not Protect You* (London: Sliver, 2017), vi.

6. Audre Lorde, "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," in *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House* (New York: Penguin Books, 2017), 1.

7. Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 134.

8. There are many examples of anthropological monographs centered on one individual: Lois Beck, *Nomad: A Year in the Life of a Qashqa'i Tribesman in Iran* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Unni Wikan, *Managing Turbulent Hearts: A Balinese Formula for Living* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); João Biehl, *Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); Vincent Crapanzano, *Tuhamti: Portrait of a Moroccan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); Mary F. Smith, *Baba of Karo: A Woman of the Muslim Hausa* (New York: Faber and Faber, 1954); and Marjorie Shostak, *Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman* (London: Allen Lane, 1982). See also Jan Patrick Heiss, "Assessing Ernst Tugendhat's Philosophical Anthropology as a Theoretical Template for an Empirical Anthropology of the Individual," *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 140, no. 1 (2015): 35–54; and Jan Patrick Heiss and Albert Piette, "Individuals in Anthropology," *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 140, no. 1 (2015): 5–17. On the history of the use and scope of case studies, see John Forrester, *Thinking in Cases* (London: Polity, 2016).

9. I am thinking of three works in particular: Carlo Ginzburg, *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*, trans. John Tedeschi and Anne C. Tedeschi (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013); Carlo Ginzburg, *Threads and Traces: True False Fictive*, trans. Anne C. Tedeschi and John Tedeschi (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); and Paul Veyne, *Writing History: Essay on Epistemology*, trans. Mina Moore-Rinvolucri (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1984).

10. Michele K. Evans, Lisa Rosenbaum, Debra Malina, Stephen Morrissey, and Eric J. Rubin, "Diagnosing and Treating Systemic Racism," *New England Journal of Medicine* 383 (2020): 274–76; see also Clarence C. Gravlee and Elizabeth

Sweet, "Race, Ethnicity, and Racism in Medical Anthropology, 1977–2002," *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 22, no. 1 (2008): 27–51; and David R. Williams, Jourdyn A. Lawrence, and Brigette A. Davis, "Racism and Health: Evidence and Needed Research," *Annual Review of Public Health* 40 (2019): 105–25.

11. John Hobersman, *Black and Blue: The Origins and Consequences of Medical Racism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

12. Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *Your Silence Will Not Protect You* (London: Silver, 2017), 90.

2. STILL LIFE

1. Ian Hacking, *Representing and Intervening* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 132. I am also thinking here of the passage from Ludwig Wittgenstein with which Elaine Scarry opens her book *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001): "What is the felt experience of cognition at the moment one stands in the presence of a beautiful boy or flower or bird? It seems to incite, even to require, the act of replication. Wittgenstein says that when the eye sees something beautiful, the hand wants to draw it" (3). But I might appreciate even more Jean-Luc Nancy's first line of *The Pleasure in Drawing*, trans. Philip Armstrong (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013): "Drawing is the opening of form" (1).

2. This thought is borrowed from Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 7. The idea of "moving closer" in Stewart's work shares kinship with Theodor Adorno's thoughts on Walter Benjamin's writing by way of method: "The thoughts press close to its objects, seek to touch it, smell it, taste it and thereby transform itself." Theodor Adorno, *Prisms* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983), 240; see also Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); and Lauren Berlant, "Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency)," *Critical Inquiry* 33, no. 4 (2007): 754–80.

3. John Berger, *Bento's Sketchbook* (New York: Pantheon, 2011), 44.

4. Berger, *Bento's Sketchbook*, 106.

5. Berger, *Bento's Sketchbook*, 35–37.

6. Susan Stewart, *On Longing* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992), 13.

7. Two thinkers immediately come to mind: Tarek Elhaik talks about a "zone of mutual intrusion" in his *The Incurable Image* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2016), and Maggie Nelson welcomes contamination as a quality of our relationships as they become intimate in *The Argonauts* (Minneapolis: Graywolf, 2015) and considers the possibility of rupture as a quality of care in *The Art*