

Foreword

UNFINISHED

JOÃO BIEHL AND PETER LOCKE

Alice Neel's 1965 oil painting *James Hunter Black Draftee* is an arresting portrait. Hunter's pensive face and supporting hand are richly filled in, while his ears and the rest of his body are only loosely sketched. The uncompleted image exposes how lifeworlds enter into the work of art: the artist had been inviting passersby on the New York City street into her studio to sit for her. Hunter, who said he had been drafted to fight in the war in Vietnam, never returned for a second sitting.

We don't know what happened to Hunter.¹ But we know who wanted war and what war did, and how old and new wars make plain the transience and value of all things. Outlined by Neel in the spur of the moment, the seemingly invisible body of this fleeting subject is now a powerful reminder of the perennial struggle of minorities in the United States and elsewhere for full political recognition of their personhood. Hunter's detailed, expressive face also evokes his singularity and the concerns that weigh on him, while revealing little of who he is. Yet it is Hunter who punctuates the representation. So the painting seems unfinished, and this transfixing unfinishedness—the worlds on edge and the open-endedness of people's becoming—is the very stuff of art.

With its receptiveness to and incorporation of the accidental and the unknown, Neel and Hunter's artwork (not possible without each other and the

world's ongoingness) leaves us with a haunting, incomplete aesthetic and a challenge to further inquire into the multiplicity of lifeworlds and the plasticity of anthropological figures.

So, how can we ethnographically apprehend these worldly fabrications and the lives therein, constituted as they are by that which is unresolved, and bring this unfinishedness into our storytelling?

How are long-standing theoretical approaches able—or not—to illuminate emergent political, economic, and affective realities?

How can the becomings of our informants and collaborators, and the movements and counterknowledges they fashion, serve as alternative figures of thought that might animate comparative work, political critique, and anthropology to come?

Ethnographic creations are about the plasticity and unfinishedness of human subjects and lifeworlds. And the essays in this book are themselves unfinished views of people (including anthropologists, scientists, and artists) in the process of becoming through things, relations, stories, survival, destruction, and reinvention in the borrowed time of an invisible present.

The notion of becoming, which organizes our individual and collective efforts, emphasizes the plastic power of people and the intricate problematics of how to live alongside, through, and despite the profoundly constraining effects of social, structural, and material forces, which are themselves plastic. Unfinishedness is both precondition and product of becoming, and we chose our title—*Unfinished*—as a way to draw attention to this important feature of all of the book's characters and inquiries, its attempts at open thinking and experimental writing. Unfinishedness is a feature as generative to art and knowledge production as it is to living.

We work with an expansive definition of unfinishedness. Our ethnographic work always begins in the midst of social life, its rhythms, affects, surprises (from the trivial to the tragic), and urgencies. The categories and books we bring to our investigations are continually challenged by the figuring out, disfiguring, and refiguring of lifeworlds and subjects. Desire follows world-historical trajectories, and ethnographic subjects have their own ideas of and relationships to the constraints and unfinishedness of their lives and milieus. Becoming troubles and exceeds our ways of knowing and acting. It pushes us to think against the grain, to consider the uncertain and unexpected in the world, and to care for the as-yet-unthought that interrogates history and keeps modes of existence open to improvisation. We are tasked with the otherwise.

To attend to the unfinished, we need a conscientious empiricism wedded to a radical analytical openness to complexity and wonder. For critical analysis, writing, and social engagement, the rewards of staying with formations that exceed us and exploring the incomplete are far from trifling. We can better understand how political forces and capital expansions exhaust existing (not ideal) forms and absorb some of the qualities and textures of individual and collective experiments with relating and knowing—lived tensions between power and flight, mortality and vitality, history and invention, creation and ruination, care and disregard, and belonging and fugitivity. As we seek to articulate a human science of the uncertain and unknown, we can also restore movement and possibility to ethical thinking and political practice: a counter-technique, a continual capacity for recalibration that the ethnographic craft and theorizing enable.

Engaging a range of pressing contemporary problematics—including war and its aftermath, economic transformation, racial inequality, gun violence, religiosity, therapeutic markets, animal rights activism, and abrupt environmental change—the authors of *Unfinished* foreground the malleable nature of human-nonhuman interactions and demonstrate how people and social forms partake of and are shaped by multiple systems and forces, themselves contingent and shifting, all with variable degrees of agency.

We work at a granular level of ethnographic description and interpretation, following people and things—those deemed ex-human, canny artists and wounded animals, forest firefighters and climate scientists, embattled neighborhoods, inks and pharmakons, sites of prayer, the bones of missing war victims. We listen carefully and notice swerves, follow leads and trajectories, and translate these movements into thought and writing. Each essay in *Unfinished* finds its way to an arresting encounter, image, concept, or kernel that enters into a series, always midway, providing prismatic points of contact with assemblages of force and form in multiple worlds.

An anthropology of becoming demands more than the flat realism that comes with standard practices of contextualization and historicization, and it must not simply mimic or echo the dark determinisms that mark much of social theory. The authors of *Unfinished* insist on the indispensable moral and analytical value of the micro, the singular and partial, which requires a different, more fine-grained, and humble logic than that of a generality subsuming all things into aggregates, repetitions, and models. Thus we take a situated, cartographic (rather than archaeological) approach to self-world entanglements and leaking social fields.

Here, objects are milieus in themselves; worlds are at once material, social, and symbolic, simultaneously precarious and in motion; and individuals and collectives are constituted as much by affects and intensities as by structural forces. We trace people's trajectories as they grow out of themselves, fold in exteriorities, and become other. In attending to orientations, directions, entries, walls, and exits, our combined ethnographic essays produce a geography of becomings: maps of the microdynamics of living and the new configurations of thought, affect, solidarity, and resentment that create tears and exclusions—but also openings, however minor—in macro-level realities and scaling projects.

To grow closer to our anthropological subjects—and to build a form of critique concerned more with identifying crossroads and opening up possibilities than with making judgments and enforcing totalizing analytical schemes—each of the chapters in *Unfinished* embraces the literary expressivity and exploratory potentials of the essay genre. Our “Ethnographic Sensorium” introduces the book's main ethnographic characters and life-worlds and articulates the methodological and analytical significance of an anthropology of becoming. Throughout *Unfinished*, the authors offer a rich spectrum of the ways that becoming emerges in specific lives and milieus and against the backdrop of world-historical forces—all experimenting with writing and grappling with the incompleteness and open-endedness of fieldwork and cultural theory. In the book's afterword, Michael M. J. Fischer lovingly rereads the essays, teasing out their generativity and what they reveal about the becoming of anthropology and the problematics of futures on the horizon.

We tell stories that are as much material and political-economic as personal and ethical. We are always working outward: pulling into line with our subjects, moving sideways to follow them, getting out of their way, returning and sitting with them, drawing out characters, probing philosophical questions, bringing certain concepts into focus, and letting others emerge only partially, but meaningfully so. Our storytelling destabilizes hierarchies of expertise and confuses the distinction between the finished and the unfinished, illuminating the ethnographic open systems in which anthropologists and subjects are entangled, folded into lives, transformations, and thinking across time and space.

Unfinished's ethnographic essaying is an invitation to readers to open their own thinking to the unpredictability, multiplicity, and incommensurability that animate lives and realities—and the ethnographic craft itself—and to find resonances, keeping critical thought engaged and multiplying.

NOTE

- 1 Alice Neel's painting *James Hunter Black Draftee* was shown in the 2016 exhibit *Unfinished: Thoughts Left Visible* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. "We don't think [James Hunter] died because his name is not on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, in D.C.," said Kelly Baum, one of the curators of the exhibit. "But we don't know what happened to him" (quoted in C. Swanson, "What Happened to 'James Hunter Black Draftee'? A Mystery at the Met Breuer"). See also Baum, Bayer, and Wagstaff, *Unfinished: Thoughts Left Visible*.