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In Response to "In Praise of Makeshift Finishing"
On Makeshifting, Publishing, and Storytelling

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Ideas

In Response to "In Praise of Makeshift Finishing"

On Makeshifting, Publishing, and Storytelling

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Those who have read Daniel Tubb's (2020) monograph *Shifting Livelihoods* know how thorough a storyteller he is. Chock-full of vivid scenes of the Chocó goldfields in Colombia, the book reads like a subtle proposition in favour of the thrills and rewards of slow writing. It was the cumulative result, as Tubb recounts here, of his choice to spend the past few years revising his doctoral dissertation into a monograph, rather than committing himself to building a portfolio of publish-or-perish articles. Yet it is not an argument of slowness that Tubb is advancing in his petition for "makeshift finishing." In many ways, he is telling us the exact opposite: Do not overthink it; do not spend too much time perfecting the text; get the "something good enough" out there and have it interact with the world. His appeal to makeshifting is a call to align our publishing strategies with "a shorter, more imperfect, contingent, and temporary way of writing"; one in which our publications are not the end result of settled theories and steadfast strategizing, but unstable pieces that are formative of, and formed by, ideas that are always fluid and incomplete.

Tubb's thought-provoking piece is categorically anthropological. Stop overplanning the big picture! Put your skill and industry in lockstep with the messy temporalities of ethnographic (and human) practice! To be sure, in his adoption of the makeshift, and attendant rejection of formulae, one hears echoes of previous anthropological critiques of formulistic planning—say, Ingold's (2020, 14) ruminations on "amateur rigour," or Scott's (1998) juxtaposition of state formation with *mētis*. Tubb's argument also brings to mind

the age-old ethnographic adage that writing is an iterative process that requires many "crappy first drafts" (Ghodsee 2020, 59). What Tubb adds to the debate is that we ought to view as processual and contingent not only the production of text, but also the publication thereof—or rather, to view publishing as one more element of the iterative process that is writing.

But there is a tension here, one that I would have loved to see Tubb delve into a little bit deeper. Because more often than not, academic text is vehemently dismissive of instability. Perhaps part of this dismissal has to do with the affects that writing itself generates. In many cultural contexts, putting things on paper performs a task of ontological fixation. As Yael Navaro-Yashin (2007, 84) observes for European contexts, "Printed, hand-written, and/or signed documentation carries the image of proof, stability, and durability." Indeed, inscription often performatively transforms our verbal agreements into solid matters of fact, our personal truths into shared truths, our open-ended identities into finished conclusions.

Arguably, this stabilizing quality of text-on-page gathers special force when writing is done in the name of academia. "Everything can be revised and tinkered with," writes Tubb. I am skeptical about the degree to which this can actually be applied to journal articles and monographs. Tubb's call for processual writing feels like a far cry from the rigid "formulae" of academic publishing. To an extent, this is a matter of format. Many of us are trained to make our messy fieldwork observations consonant with not-quite-messy text structures—think of the Introduction and Conclusion that neatly demarcate the story. Yet even those who tinker with the occasional prologue and coda are limited in their freedom to makeshift their texts. For purposes of reproducibility (or stability, if you will), most books and journal volumes are not permitted to be retouched once they are put out in print or uploaded on the web. What is more, the rules of the game dictate that the author's ideas should be original and unpublished when sent out for review; preferably, they should *not* contain parts of the "shorter pieces" (blogs, op-eds, book reviews) that Tubb champions as building blocks for longer works. Tubb urges us to think of publishing as something more than "a way to pad a CV." I would add that any plea to author "shorter pieces" should join forces with a more political plea to rethink how we value these pieces on resumes and deal with their reusability—so that, eventually, such short stories too can "pad a CV."

For now, given that much CV-padding still comes from the hard-to-makeshift articles and monographs, I would like to see Tubb's argument tie into a more

substantive discussion about which books and papers we might write. Why limit the makeshift to strategies of "finishing"? Why not also employ the concept to imagine open-ended forms of storytelling that reject the finished narrative altogether? Such storytelling is, of course, nothing new, and older and newer ethnographies have shown creative strategies of narration and text structuring to highlight the unstable life projects of interlocutors (for example, Abu-Lughod 1993; Hetherington 2020; Tsing 2015). I am curious to learn how the notion of "writing as makeshift" can contribute to our thinking about these strategies.

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