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## SHORTCUTS

# Why do we read the classics?

Giovanni DA COL, *SOAS, University of London*;  
Claudio SOPRANZETTI, *University of Oxford* (eds.);

Fred MYERS, *New York University*;  
Anastasia PILIAVSKY, *University of Cambridge*;  
John L. JACKSON, Jr., *University of Pennsylvania*;  
Yarimar BONILLA, *Rutgers University*;  
Adia BENTON, *Northwestern University*;  
Paul STOLLER, *West Chester University*

Debates on the epistemological, ethical, and historical constitution of the anthropological corpus are one of the reasons why anthropology has always thrived. Whether in terms of the complex relation between the production of anthropological knowledge and the political systems in which it takes place, or the proliferation of the language of “mutual constitution” as a way to bypass questions of causality, the question of the “suffering” vs. the “good,” the attribution of “colonial” or “white male privilege” to ethnographic classics, or the hackneyed debates on the precariousness of academic life, contemporary anthropology is traversed by *critical shortcuts*, worn paths we often take, without reflecting on them. This first installment of a new journal section titled “Shortcuts” aims to investigate and question the analytical, historical, and interpretive arguments that have become common knowledge in anthropology, intuitively true and agreeable, yet rarely subject to rigorous scrutiny and discussion. The first “Shortcut” engages with the question “Why read the classics?” and offers six varied responses by scholars who deal with how the anthropological canon is produced and what is at stake in preserving it, going back to it, or getting away from it.

Keywords: classics, canon, colonialism, culture, anthropology, education, curriculum

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## Preface

Giovanni DA COL, SOAS, *University of London*

Claudio SOPRANZETTI, *University of Oxford*

The scene repeats every year in introductory anthropology classrooms. Lecture 1, Anthropology 101. Students eye each other, sorting out friends, allies, the odd ones they cannot stand. Professors scan the class, trying to distinguish the proactive students from the ones needing encouragement. The first textual encounter is with a tome written during the colonial period by an invariably white, often male, scholar. It explores the rationalities and inner logic of the *X* society—or culture—under domination at the time, and since then it has been enshrined in the canon of anthropology. “This is racist!” someone exclaims. “Why are we reading what privileged old white men had to say about people they oppressed?” “We need to read it in context,” someone else contends. “It may sound racist now, but it wasn’t at the time. In fact the author was a progressive; he even had radical sympathies.” “Regardless, the book is a must-read,” a third person interjects. “How can we call ourselves anthropologists if we don’t read it?” These predictable disagreements are not just an attempt to decolonize or ignore the discipline’s colonial past. They signal a struggle between conflicting claims of collective orders and their hubristic attempts to portray large-scale generalizations of reality, on the one side, and the difficulties of sitting with singularities, permeable boundaries, and contested discourses, on the other. In a world of many truths, epistemological anarchy is something to be respected, and for some, to be cultivated.

Debates on the epistemological, ethical, and historical constitution of the anthropological corpus are one of the reasons our discipline thrived. Discussions over the unsettling relation between the building blocks and tools of anthropological practice, the value of the knowledge they produce, and the always-fraught political milieus in which they develop had a central role in guiding anthropological reflexivity. Over time these debates tend to ossify. New observations and genuine enthusiasm for the questions they raise give ways to predictable conceptual routes, analytical, historical, and interpretive shortcuts that become common sense, intuitively true and agreeable, yet rarely subject to rigorous scrutiny and discussion.

In 1967, Robin Fox wrote that: “Kinship is to anthropology what logic is to philosophy or the nude is to art; it is the basic discipline of the subject” (1967: 10). His words, while apparently emphatic and decisive, raised and continue to raise a question on what constitutes the methodological core of anthropology—or whether there should be a core at all. Is studying kinship—as much as gift giving or shamanism—just a pedagogical activity, a scholastic homage to a tradition that we should be loosely aware of in our training as anthropologists? Is it rather a methodological necessity, an essential learning tool that defines our enterprise and its ultimate goals, whether we work in Papua New Guinea, in the City of London, or among the white working class in Wyoming? Or is it part of our *raison d’être*: recording, analyzing, and preserving cultural practices that we encounter and become custodians of?

Last August, Marshall Sahlins posted a self-declared rant on the *HAU* Facebook page, subtitled “Where have all the cultures gone?”<sup>1</sup> In it, Sahlins lamented that contemporary anthropological training and works may be turning their backs on the discipline’s roots, ditching its commitment to the comparative study of the human condition. The vocabulary of kinship, gift giving, reciprocity—the lynchpins of human sociality—is being abandoned. As a result, Sahlins warned, we may be abdicating our role as custodians of disappearing local knowledge that nobody else will preserve. The rant hit a nerve and responses flooded in, with thousands of views, shares, retweets. Sure enough, the usual shortcuts quickly emerged. One led down the road of: “Obviously we must read the classics and learn about the kula trade, potlatches, pig feasts, and kinship structures! How dare you challenge our founding fathers!” The other led in the direction of declaring: “Why should we anthropologists be custodians of anything? This view, like the thinkers who held it, decades ago, is a product of the colonial enterprise: we must ditch it at once! In fact it’s racist even to suggest otherwise.” As the number of responses grew and more and more voices joined in, alternative analytical and conceptual routes started to appear, loosely coalescing around the question: Why do we read the classics?

The question is borrowed from Italo Calvino’s essay “Why read the classics?” first translated in English in the *New York Review of Books* in 1986. Calvino answers with fourteen points; we wish to recollect a handful:

- 6) A classic is a book that has never finished saying what it has to say.  
...
- 10) We use the word “classic” of a book that takes the form of an equivalent to the universe, on a level with the ancient talismans.  
...
- 13) A classic is something that tends to relegate the concerns of the moment to the status of background noise . . . .  
...
- 14) A classic is something that persists as a background noise even when the most incompatible momentary concerns are in control of the situation.

Alfred Gell once compared works of art to traps, as traps are lethal *dispositifs* constructed to be objectified forms of both the intentionality of their creator, the hunter, and models of the inner-worlds (*Umwelt*) of the animal prey (1996: 27). What Calvino summons in his alchemic analysis of the classics’ formula is a quality of resilience, a contemplation-trap providing a haven from the singularities and trivia of everyday life while entangling the intentionalities of its readers. It aims to construct a coherent and systematic whole out of fragmentary and partial points of view and it wants us to enter and abide by its rules and shut out the noise. There is also an essential “catchiness” in some classics, which the critics seem to overlook. To paraphrase Boyer (1994), the success of an idea is a consequence of its counterintuitiveness and transgression of a number of cognitive expectations, or even its capacity to “condense” (Houseman and Severi 1994) a number of contradictory connotations in a communicative register of ritualization and play. The monograph

1. The thread on the HAU Facebook page can be found at <https://www.facebook.com/haujournal/posts/1525246060874162>.

is such a ground for experiment, play, one which brackets reality and its expectations of sincerity. It's a paradise of deception we seek. Take the contradictions condensed in texts like Evans-Pritchard's (1937) Azande classic, where "witchcraft" emerges as a *natural* philosophy of *contingency*, or Ruth Benedict's *The chrysanthemum and the sword* (1946), a text on the contradictions of Japanese culture delivered contradictorily. We strive for readings which lead us to ponder on fictive oppositions such as gift societies vs. commodity societies, individual vs. dividual, guilt vs. shame cultures. Or perhaps one of the differences between classics and modern texts is the lack of shading and embellishment, their literary style. Geertz had aspirations as a writer and certainly had the skills of one; Alfred Gell recalls how reading Malinowski's *Coral gardens* made him a better writer: "Malinowski was a supremely literary stylist whose elegant texts (along with Evans-Pritchard) should be imitated by every anthropological beginner" (1999: 8).

There would be much to say about the question of how disciplinary findings and reflections can be presented today and how modern digital technologies could liberate them from the written word and develop into more sophisticated thought-traps. Indeed, documentaries can become classics too, and we have barely touched on experimental forms merging writing with moving images, even with the increased relevance of online publications.

Intrigued by the many alternative routes that these reflections opened up, we invited six scholars from different formations and backgrounds to engage with Calvino's question and Sahlin's rant. The engagement elicited a number of secondary questions: What is the anthropologist's toolkit? What is the anthropological canon, and how is it produced? And what should it include and exclude? Does the colonial environment in which anthropological knowledge was produced destroy its validity? Is there value in the classic anthropological project of cataloguing and analyzing cultural practices, or should it be abandoned?

Each of the contributors graciously offered a diverse set of responses. Fred Myers questions the hackneyed contrast between valuing the classics and endorsing the insights of contemporary anthropology. The former, he argues, can play a significant role in contemporary knowledge-production, whether in terms of specific contents, the history of anthropological debates and their critiques, or analytical contributions to present-day questions. Anastasia Piliavsky, on the contrary, raises a staunch defense of the classics as more theoretically daring and diverse in their questions and approaches in comparison to the dullness of contemporary anthropology. The latter, she contends, is affected by a presentism that drives it to reinvent the wheel and, even more disconcertingly, to give up what she sees as the core anthropological insight—"that human worlds are made not of things that are freestanding, "out there" in the world, things that can be seen or directly experienced, but of ideas with which people divide, sort, and arrange the world" (p. 13). Going back to the classics, she concludes, is a way to see through the intellectual, ethical, and political conservatism that thrives when anthropology moves away from them. John L. Jackson, Jr., offers his personal journey through graduate school as an example of the complexities of defending the value of anthropological knowledge while criticizing the context of the classics' production and their tendencies to orientalizing. In his view, therefore, the point of reading the canon "isn't just to learn the canon for the sake of doing so. It is also to teach oneself about the unfurling of disciplinary possibility, the

move from theory to theory, from debate to debate—none of which we’ve resolved” (p. 20), and to learn from the classics “a way of sensing and making sense of complex cultural worlds that still has much to teach us” (ibid.). Yarimar Bonilla takes on two shortcuts that we proposed to question—“We must read the classics!” and “The classics are tainted by colonial history: ditch them!” (p. 23)—and shows the limits and the significance of both approaches, defining the difference between classics and canonical texts. Recalling Sahlins’ heed to remain the custodian of cultural practices, she asks: “What worldview led anthropologist to imagine themselves as ‘custodians’ of foreign cultural practices and (to be generous to Sahlins’ intentions) as the defenders of them?” (p. 24). She proposes reading the canon symptomatically to understand previous worldviews while remaining ready to challenge, unsettle, and subvert it. Adia Benton, rather than asking whether we should read the classics or not, explores “how a canon of classics comes into being and compels a social group to defend it” (p. 29). Analyzing the get-off-my-lawn attitude often attached to the defense of the classics, she concludes wondering whether decolonizing the canon is a meaningful project and whether we should simply let go of the classics and choose more agreeable kin. Finally, Paul Stoller takes the opposite road and calls for a slower anthropology, in which we recognize and discuss the contribution of our ancestors, as his work in and on Songhay epistemology taught him to do. The classics, he argues, provide the ground without which it would be impossible to walk, however different from theirs our steps are.

After reading the insightful contributions and the reference to the heterogenous collection of texts which had profound impacts on our authors, we muse on whether there is a further element of seduction which forces an engagement with the classics: our passions for *lists* and *taxonomies*. Before founding *HAU*, Giovanni used to play a game with all senior anthropologists, asking them to list the five books they would save from the apocalypse. Everyone fell for it. They loved it. One could argue that classics are created through humanity’s passion for lists. Lists help create order, and creating order helps us to keep the universe under control, to put the incomprehensible within our grasp. Classics are born out of our need to make lists. What are yours, and which of today’s monographs will become the listed classic of tomorrow? What monograph will be able to condense a respect for singularities and some marvellous generalization into one? Which new texts will steer clear of shortcuts and bring us down untraveled paths?

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### Pourquoi lisons-nous les classiques?

Les débats sur la constitution épistémologique, éthique et historique du corpus anthropologique font partie de ce qui fait vivre la discipline. Mais que ce soit dans le domaine des relations complexes entre la production du savoir anthropologique et les systèmes politiques dans laquelle elle survient, dans celui de la prolifération du registre d'une 'co-constitution' afin d'écarter les questions de causalité, dans le rapport entre 'la souffrance' et 'le bien', et l'attribution d'un privilège "colonial," blanc et masculiniste, aux classiques ethnographiques, ou encore dans nos discussions rebattues sur la précarité de la vie intellectuelle, l'anthropologie contemporaine est jalonnée de nombreux raccourcis, de chemins bien souvent empruntés sans y réfléchir. Ceci est le premier volet d'une nouvelle section du journal intitulée 'Shortcuts' (raccourcis). Elle a pour but d'enquêter et d'interroger les thèses analytiques, historiques et interprétatives qui sont devenues des idées qui vont de soi en anthropologie, qui semblent souvent intuitive et convenable, mais qui font rarement l'objet d'une analyse rigoureuse ou de discussions. Le premier 'Shortcut' se penche sur la question: "Pourquoi relire nos classiques?" Il offre six réponses différentes proposées par des chercheurs qui réfléchissent à la production du canon anthropologique et aux enjeux de sa préservation, de nos relectures et des avantages aussi de parfois s'éloigner du canon.

Giovanni DA COL is a Research Associate at SOAS, University of London, where he is also the Director of Publications of the Centre for Ethnographic Theory, which he cofounded. He lectures in the anthropology of thought at Cambridge and is currently a Fellow of the Institute of Advanced Studies in the Humanities at the University of Edinburgh.

Giovanni da Col  
Centre for Ethnographic Theory  
SOAS, University of London  
Thornough Street



*Russell Square  
London WC1H 0XG  
UK  
gd18@soas.ac.uk*

Claudio SOPRANZETTI is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at All Souls College, University of Oxford. He is also a research associate of the Oxford Programme for the Future of Cities. He lectures in political anthropology at the Oxford Institute of Cultural and Social Anthropology.

*Claudio Sopranzetti  
All Souls College  
High Street  
Oxford OX1 4AL  
UK  
claudio.sopranzetti@anthro.ox.ac.uk*





SHORTCUTS

## Rant or reason

### Old wine and new bottles in anthropology

Fred MYERS, *New York University*

Marshall Sahlins' "emeritus rant" about reading the classics in anthropology seemed to occasion a stir of responses on Facebook when it appeared at the end of August this year. Having tentatively marked an interest in the question, I now find myself on the spot to give my thoughts. One might have to regard this question as a rejection of current work or a return to some imagined Golden Age, rejecting the postmodernist, the postcolonial, or the feminist and other emergent forms of anthropological work. That is not how I see it, which leaves me to explain—modestly—why I think it's worth reading (some of) the classics. My guiding thought is that in teaching, such works are part of the process of recognizing that knowledge and its production are historically embedded in institutions and social relations, difficult to develop, partial, and always subject to further questioning. Some books may be unredeemable. In the era that has followed postmodernist and postcolonial critiques of anthropology (and particular texts), it is often useful to read those texts in the context of their time, for the tensions that might be revealed in them and possible choices writers took for a number of reasons.

The first reason for reading classic texts is easiest. If one works in a culture area, as we used to call it, engaged with cultural traditions and their descendants, some of the earlier works are valuable for their content, their insight, their positioning—both as historical record and contribution to social science. As someone who has worked with Indigenous Australians for many years, I read the works of W. E. H. Stanner, Donald Thomson, A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, Baldwin Spencer and Frank Gillen, and Phyllis Kaberry not as limitless in their value, but by critically engaging with what they reveal about the meaningful activities of Indigenous people in Australia, taking into account the particulars of time, place, and situation. We



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learn to read “through” these texts to realities unseen by the writers; we understand that we need to critique them for their theoretical, historical, and colonial *aporia*, but they are artifacts of continuing value as (sometimes) the only *witness* or *testimony* we have to Indigenous lives in other places and times. (As such records, the ethnographies are like the “classics,” themselves.) We can also see, in these same works, the unacknowledged complicities of ethnographers with gender, racial, and colonial hierarchies.

In another anthropological register, a further reason I find for reading certain classics is that some debates and topics have a history, and the dialogues or conversations that have taken place around these questions can, I think, best be understood through that history: why critical responses were made and to what. I remember sitting in my apartment some twenty-five years ago while my senior anthropologist friends Terry Turner and T. O. Beidelman (authors of two crucial essays on personhood, “The social skin” [Turner 1980] and “Some Nuer notions of nakedness” [Beidelman 1968]) argued over the merits of Evans-Pritchard’s analysis of witchcraft. Only some texts, classics, or masterpieces, allow for the exercise of such complex argument and critique, based on shared “texts.” Annette Weiner, when she had recently returned from her fieldwork in the Trobriand Islands (around 1975), was drawn into a longstanding seminar on the *kula* (at the University of Chicago, with Marshall Sahlins and Stanley Tambiah, and probably others), where she was forced to confront her ethnographic knowledge with the deep readings of Malinowski’s prior work these senior scholars brought to their seminar. I know, from talking with her in those days, how valuable that kind of challenge was for her honing her own understanding.

There are other topics that have faded in the form in which they were once explored but which continue in the present moment in what seems to be different “clothing.” Many people who have adopted what I would call a “Schneiderian” position around kinship—seeing it as “nongenealogical” (as I have myself)—have not necessarily understood the debates or the arguments through which that position was established, and what its limitations might be. It might be of value to recognize the relationship between Schneider’s *American kinship: A cultural account* (1968) and the burgeoning work of his students in Micronesia and the Pacific more generally on shared substance or shared residence (the “blood/mud hypothesis”) rather than genealogy alone as constituting “kinship relationships.” Schneider’s “cultural account” became for a new generation theoretically a legitimation for work that has extended into the “New Kinship Studies,” which encompass assisted reproduction, queer kinship, and the reframed imaginaries around genetics and disability. In another turn, how does our capacity to reconceptualize “kinship” as “caretaking” or “nurturance” connect to accounts of relationships of domestic care, or to social reproduction in various parts of the world? And, at a time when the naturalness of specific forms of marriage is at stake in a number of Western societies, anthropological masterpieces on this subject and the worldwide variations of marriage formations should not be ignored. Marjorie Wolf’s *The house of Lim* (1968) and Carol Stack’s *All our kin* (1974) would be on my list, along with Evans-Pritchard’s *Kinship and marriage among the Nuer* (1951), Kathleen Gough on the Nayar (1959), or Audrey Richards’ (1950) work on family structure amongst the Central Bantu.” As “kinship” has been de-essentialized in some ways (or “substantialized”) as “relationship,” what are we to make of the apparently limited number of “kinship” or

“relationship” terminologies around the world and their plausible location in cycles of domestic organization and reproduction?

In recent years, no doubt in recognition of my personal reach into the past, I have been teaching the history of anthropology. I do so not as a Whig history of theory (although that might be preferred), but rather as an approach recommended by A. I. Hallowell (1965): “the history of anthropology as an anthropological problem.” I approach the material in this way not simply from the desire to be sociological, but rather in recognition of postcolonial, postmodernist, and feminist critiques, as well as efforts to decolonize the field. Current theory, in my view, inclines us to recognize that our theorizing is itself cultural production and therefore must be treated, critically, as located in a history, a set of institutions, and a cultural trajectory. I believe—and I teach—that Geertz’s famous “Thick description” (1973), Sahlins’ crucial *Culture and practical reason* (1976), and Wolf’s “Inventing society” (1988) arrived at a sense of anthropological theory as cultural practice. Sahlins did so explicitly; Geertz by insisting that what we have from fieldwork is “our” inscription of other people’s activity; and Wolf by acknowledging the historical and specific location of “society” as a concept. The latter was both a theoretical realization (à la Raymond Williams) and one sustained by ethnography in Papua New Guinea that was so challenging to the deployment of “society.” It is possible to see the long-term commitment of sociocultural anthropology to a kind of self-critical struggle with the privilege and ethnocentrism (or Orientalism) of our theoretical frameworks; there is value not only in accepting a degree of humility for ourselves as historical actors who can no more transcend our time and place than did those in the past, but also in recognizing the difficulties of doing so. I find some of this self-relativizing in what was so recently called “the ontological turn,” but the decentering is not limited to that project. Indeed, one might look to the opportunity to decolonize “classic” ethnographies as they are taken up by the descendants of those they represented—as in Audra Simpson’s recent *Mohawk interruptus* (2014).

Finally, as the subjects and objects of anthropological study and analysis have changed from the preoccupation with small-scale social formations and moved toward their embeddedness in larger, world-systems, are there forms of sociality evidenced in the earlier works that might illuminate current situations? Few anthropologists have the overt commitment to “comparative work” of the sort that motivated kinship studies in its descent-group days. Comparison, which was once the bread and butter of anthropological analysis (in Radcliffe-Brown’s students, among others), has become much more problematic as both the positivism of structural functionalism and the fantasy of autonomous, independent “societies” to compare have become impossible to sustain. Yet the work on “witchcraft” by many British social anthropologists explored the social variation of the targets of witchcraft accusations: the structure of “othering,” if you will—still speaks to us. I don’t know if Mary Douglas’ summary of witches as those in the “cracks” of society illuminates our understanding of the horrible genocides in Rwanda or Srebrenica or the demonizing of immigrants by Donald Trump, but the questions may serve us to ask something about the emergent structurings of social fields and their effects. Perhaps these earlier works, set at more limited scales, can offer some purchase on differing structures of sociality within larger systems—of colonialism or neoliberalism, for example—which I think has come to be somewhat neglected.

In another tradition, but one that is also steadfastly comparative as historical materialism, I regularly teach Eric Wolf's brilliant *Peasant wars of the twentieth century* (1969) for its demonstration of the effect of different structures of production on the subsequent historical transformations of "peasant societies," and in a more global framework of the historical world-system, his final masterwork, *Europe and the people without history* (1982).

My favorite "classics"? I think everyone would have his or her own. But I would include Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922), and also his "Baloma: the spirits of the dead in the Trobriand Islands" (1916), as well as Evans-Pritchard's *Witchcraft, oracles and magic among the Azande* (1937). As a devotee of the Manchester School's engagement with the immediacy of the extended case and specificity of situation, I would want students to read Victor Turner's *Schism and continuity in an African society* (1957) and Barbara Myerhoff's timeless groundbreaking book, *Number our days* (1980). I still have students read Franz Boas on *Primitive art* (1927) and Paul Radin's *Autobiography of a Winnebago Indian* (1960), and Eleanor Leacock's *The Montagnais "hunting territory" and the fur trade* (1954), to be read with Engels' *The origin of the family, private property and the state* ([1884] 1942). And if I am permitted a free, wild choice, let me suggest a wonderful classic old ethnography as it has come to exist for a current community: Knud Rasmussen's *Report of the Fifth Thule Expedition* (1940), and the Igloodik Isuma production feature film based on portions of that work describing what happened to the last shaman from their region in 1927, *The journals of Knud Rasmussen* (Kunuk and Cohn 2006), using parts of Rasmussen's account to understand their forebears' conversion to Christianity. For at least some anthropologists, there is a new life to early works as they are re-signified and decolonized in making local histories and repairing the ruptures of time.

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Fred MYERS, Silver Professor of Anthropology at New York University, is the author of a "classic" ethnography, *Pintupi country, Pintupi self* (University of California Press, 1986), and *Painting culture: The making of an Aboriginal high art* (Duke University Press, 2002), and codirector of the film *Remembering Yayayi* (with Pip Deveson and Ian Dunlop, 2015).

Fred Myers  
Department of Anthropology  
New York University  
25 Waverly Place  
New York, NY 10003  
USA  
fred.myers@nyu.edu



SHORTCUTS

## Disciplinary memory against ambient pietism

Anastasia PILIAVSKY, *University of Cambridge*

I have never cared for classics. The idea that I should take interest in a book or a painting or a film or a piece of music just because it is widely regarded as an model of excellence, or because it is old enough to have earned prestige, has always struck me as preposterous. Since I have become an anthropologist, however, my instinct has pulled me increasingly in the opposite direction. Amidst ubiquitous pursuits of the newest now-and-wow (the hot new “key term” or Foucault’s last unexploited neologism), whenever I am looking for inspiration—interesting ideas to meditate on or disagree with—I flip through the back issues of *JASO* (*Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford*) or *Man*, not the current issues of the *JRAI* (*Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*) or the *American Ethnologist*. Or I look for a good novel, a piece of intelligent journalism, or a smart book review. Mine is not the pursuit of vintage chic, nor is it contrarianism, but a habit that has been shaped by experience. More often than not, the experience of reading anthropologists’ current output, processed through the peer-review meat mincer, is one of monotony of subject-matter, theories, theorists, and shibboleths, to say nothing of the writing style and genre.

So, why the tedium? No doubt, a rummage through a crop of writing in any academic discipline at any given time is bound to generate some boredom. But anthropology’s current homogeny is truly striking. (One would have thought that one thing that anthropologists, with their range of research encounter, could guarantee is variety.) Doubtless, some of the repetition is tactical—an attempt to satisfy the (perceived) requirements of employment in an intensely competitive and increasingly uncertain job market—but much of it has intellectual roots.



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Over the past thirty years, anthropology's horizon of epistemic significance has dramatically shrunk: the "relevant literatures" one needs to "engage with" in order to publish stretch back only two or three decades, with "classics" usually cited totemically, if at all. Despite anthropology's disavowal of the label of "science," in this it has come to resemble less a humanity and more a lab science like biochemistry, where anything written more than five years ago is no longer subject to discussion, since thought to have already been proven either right or wrong. Of course, anthropology has nothing like the biochemists' level of agreement on the discipline's purpose, method, and proof, but the practice of epistemic disposability is the same. Just look at the dates of references that appear in current journals. University teachers of anthropology continue to put "classics" on reading lists, but in this (as in other matters) teaching and professional practice have long parted company. Students who once happily wrote undergraduate essays on the matrilineal puzzle leave the oldies behind the minute they embark on a career.

This presentism has had a variety of damaging consequences. Some draw no more than a yawn or a bemused smile: only a discipline intensely ignorant of its history could be excited by the "ontological turn" (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017), which pivots on the injunction to take our informants seriously (Candea 2011), or by the assertion that one can be an anthropologist without doing ethnography (Ingold 2008). I thought we already knew that Mauss did not have to do ethnography to practice magnificent anthropology (see Allen 2000b). Other consequences are more disconcerting, such as the fact that the new generation of anthropologists believe, and moralize about, a set of untruths about their discipline's immediate past—claiming that an earlier generation were ahistorical, unselfconscious exoticists, essentializing bigots, and empire's agents (besides being pale, stale, and male to boot)—because they only know about the past by hearsay (see Lewis 1998). Our historical shallowness, however, does worse than produce rude youths who reinvent wheels or spin them. The failure of disciplinary memory undermines anthropology's founding intellectual achievement, turning anthropologists from the most enlightened and progressive of human scientists to the most derivative.

This achievement rests on the proposition that human worlds are made not of things that are freestanding, "out there" in the world, things that can be seen or directly experienced, but of ideas with which people divide, sort, and arrange the world. This insight is neither unique to anthropology nor original to it (see Allen 1994, 2000a), but it has found in the discipline its most vivid expression and vigorous proof. The most explicit, programmatic statement of this idea is in Durkheim and Mauss' *Primitive classification* ([1903] 1963), but it also runs through a wide range of classics be it Lévy-Bruhl's (e.g., [1910] 1985) or Boas' (e.g., 1911), Evans-Pritchard's (1940), Douglas' (1966), or Sahlins' (1995).

The conception of a world made of ideas is radical. It is radical politically, culturally, intellectually, and morally. Politically, because it is fundamental to anthropology's biggest breakthrough political statement—that no culture is primitive—made by Boas (1911), who derived his judgment not from things he could touch and see (which, mind you, he researched fastidiously), but from their conception of the world, in which he discerned an internally coherent cultural logic, a cosmology. It is radical culturally because it poses a frontal challenge to the



empiricist Euro-American intuition of a *sui generis* material world (on the empiricist folly, see Leach 1957; Ardener 1989; or Dresch and James 2000). It is radical intellectually because it offers a way to appreciate fundamental differences without treating them as essentially inaccessible ontological enclosures (as per de Castro 2015); it posits cultural worlds not as ontologies, but as epistemic spheres or zones of knowledge that are by their nature open to learning and comprehension. Finally, it is radical morally because it requires social analysts to suspend their own normative judgment to understand other people's truths.

Since the 1980s, however, anthropology has been losing touch with this insight in its turn away from what is thinkable in human life to what can be "directly experienced": various forms of practice, transaction, and process, objects, affect and embodiment, immanence, materiality, and so on. At first blush, anthropology after structuralism seemed to have entered a period of efflorescence, to have become more friendly and generous, open to new possibilities of method, theory, and interpretation. Departments of anthropology could now claim to teach a subject that examined humanity in all its aspects. This of course is not true. Medics, psychologists, and architects also study humanity, but not in ways that anthropologists do. Despite our discipline's ambitious title (the study of humans), anthropologists study human life through a distinctive set of questions. Our object has limits, which is precisely what makes anthropology a *discipline*. When we lose sight of these questions, however, we also lose sight of our object's shape, which starts to blur into everything and thus nothing that can anchor comparison, disagreement, or debate. What binds discussions now instead of the once-shared questions, are theories (governmentality, immanence, neoliberalism) applied recursively to ethnographic material, as if they were axioms, not answers to questions raised in other discussions (within history, philosophy, economics). The effect of such recursive application of Theory is akin to that of a visit to the Tate Modern: the shock of novelty quickly gives way to an experience of uniformity, as one installation blurs into the next, and a rising sense of an acute deficit of new ideas. It reminds one of those poetry readings filled with repetitive babbling meant to shed the fetters of grammar and vocabulary.

The real damage to anthropology, however, is the paradoxical retreat into conservatism, from which the discipline's founders painstakingly broke: the deployment of one's own beliefs and values as heuristics for the study of all human life. The consequences of this retreat are many and I shall mention here only two. The first is the persistence of functionalism, or the reduction of social analysis to a set of ready-made beliefs, whether beliefs in the primacy of the physical world (materiality) or in the individual's inner, psychological life (affect) or in the universal pursuit of autonomy (resistance). The second is anthropology's ambient pietism, or the displacement of analysis with assertions of one's own moral or political stance. It is all very well to believe in gender equality or the evils of colonialism, but when our own normative position is deployed as fundamental social *theory*—such as feminist or postcolonial theory—it does little more than reassert the already-held beliefs. The evaluative judgment built into it blocks social explanation and generates results that are complacent, conventional, and closed to the discovery of new things. The confusion of advocacy for analysis has made contemporary anthropology allergic to any kind of genuine moral or political difference. If earlier generations saw

the comprehension of fundamental moral difference—head hunting, cannibalism, tribal warfare, and the like—as their duty, the new clings increasingly to the familiar close to home. Theoretically, what has displaced different people's cosmologies are “common sense notions—of polity, self, and essential, shared humanity—that metropolitan actors and institutions foist upon the world” (Scheele and Shryock in press). The result is the growing poverty of anthropological theory, and the retreat of the discipline from the frontline of social theory.

In this context, anthropology's classics—the texts in tune with its founding insight—acquire a wholly new magnitude of significance. They are not only excellent, rewarding or generative as Calvino says ([1991] 1999), but absolutely essential to the discipline's intellectual viability. Today, in an age of radical rejection of difference, when the rhetoric of “diversity” or “multiculturalism” thinly veils an intensely homogenizing metropolitan mandate, the need for anthropology's openness to real moral and epistemological difference is as much intellectual as it is ethical and political. Anthropology's classics, whether written a century ago or yesterday, whether they are fine ethnographies or expressly theoretical works, will not dispel the fog of metropolitan commonsense, but they will help their readers find their way through it, by showing them the world, one ethnographic insight at a time.

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Anastasia PILIAVSKY teaches social anthropology at the University of Cambridge, where she is a Fellow and Director of Studies in Social Anthropology at Girton College, and a Newton-Leverhulme Fellow at the Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities; her first monograph, *Stray men: Hierarchy as hope in a society of thieves*, forthcoming from Stanford University Press.

Anastasia Piliavsky  
Girton College  
Cambridge CB3 0JG  
UK  
an379@cam.ac.uk



SHORTCUTS

## Bewitched by Boas

John L. JACKSON, Jr., *University of Pennsylvania*

During my first year as a PhD student in anthropology at Columbia University, I was told, almost as an aside (within only a few days of disembarking on the campus' concrete shores), that Franz Boas, father of American anthropology, had once cursed the department he'd founded almost a hundred years earlier. The curse was thought to manifest itself periodically in excessive amounts of dysfunction and frenzied conflict between and among its prolific faculty.

Studying cultural anthropology as a graduate student at Columbia in the mid-1990s meant negotiating a plethora of extracurricular challenges chalked up to that powerful Boasian magic: a fiercely balkanizing tenure fight that sucked graduate students into its vortex (some of us still don't speak to this day); the weird and opaque uncertainty and embarrassment of a word I'd never heard before ("receiver-ship"); major faculty departures (including my own dissertation advisor); and many high-profile faculty arrivals (one of academia's most powerful countermeasures for the flare-up of professoriate pathologies). Boas was punishing us, the theory went, for slinking further and further away from an unambiguously four-field framework. But even with all of those issues as occulted backdrop to my course of study, I still chalk up the most challenging aspect of my stint as a doctoral student not to Papa Franz's spell but to the mesmerizing scholarly incantations of Edward Said.

Columbia was, in many ways, a decidedly Saidian institution back then. Comparative literature professor Gayatri Spivak cut a large subaltern shadow across that entire northern Manhattan campus at the time, but it was her departmental colleague Edward Wadie Said who helped define the outer limits of interdisciplinary possibility in conversations among many of my fellow graduate students in the humanities and social sciences. We felt Said's influence in many of our classes, especially when comp. lit. graduate students would squeeze themselves into our anthropology courses (on topics such as kinship, beauty, performativity, the



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sacred, and more) with the sole and express/ed purpose of convincing us that our chosen scholarly field shouldn't exist, didn't produce any knowledge worth taking seriously, and couldn't be understood as anything but a mirror (masquerading as a window) that reflected the Western world's most self-aggrandizing ideological delusions. Our discipline, they argued, was not one that merited defense or reproduction. How could we be complicit with a field that historically, during its academic institutionalization at the start of the twentieth century, furthered colonialist logics while mostly pretending away (bracketing out) any substantive engagement with colonialism's easily observable consequences on the people they were researching?

Even as a first-year graduate student, I knew the critique well. Hell, I'd made the same case myself in other contexts, to other anthropology students, usually as a way to articulate the need to prioritize what Faye Harrison (1991) helped to frame as the project of "decolonizing anthropology," unlearning some of the ways of seeing that replicated ethnocentric assumptions despite the discipline's most lauded goal of punctiliously defying them. I was already well versed in the claim that anthropology, regardless of its best intentions, had been complicit in, for example, dressing up folk theories of racial hierarchy with drapes of scientific legitimacy, concocting the savages and primitives it purported to find in the field. Those comp. lit. students' concerns with the discipline's track record resonated with me, yet I still found myself trapped in a topsy-turvy intellectual world wherein I spent hours and hours after those anti-anthropology class sessions defending the discipline as best I could from calls for its complete and utter annihilation.

The entire scenario felt odd and ironic, maybe even a little pathetic. I was the African American student from a public housing project complex whose parents didn't know the first thing about graduate education. I think my late father graduated high school, but I'm not sure. My mother went back and got her college degree when I was finishing elementary school. In some inescapable ways, I represented the erstwhile subject of ethnographic inquiry, not a would-be practitioner of the anthropological arts. I was primed to be skeptical. One of the first nonrequired ethnographies I read in grad school was *Drylongso*, which included the oft-quoted concern voiced by a black factory worker talking to anthropologist John Gwaltney: "I think this anthropology is just another way to call me a nigger" (Gwaltney [1980] 1993: xix). I've never forgotten that quote. It resonates. Still, I felt compelled, in my first year of graduate school, to push back against the absolutist disciplinary dismissals of my comp. lit. classmates, a crew emboldened in their condemnation by the Foucauldian-inspired offerings of Said, especially in his book *Orientalism* (1979), which we were all reading at the time. That book was damning and powerful. It also seemed like a strong corrective to anthropological hubris. But I only wanted to throw out the bathwater, even if it remained unclear back then whether or not I would ever eventually give the baby up for adoption, too.

So, I adamantly defended the legitimacy of my newly chosen field. And the way I did that was to go back to the classics. Not because they got everything right. In fact, specifically because they didn't. We were learning from mistakes, even and especially in the masterpieces. They were theorizing in real time, debating one another about major theoretical concerns, demonstrating that anthropology did have something important to say about the world.

One of the texts that most resonated with me during the days I spent fending off cross-disciplinary shade from those would-be Saidians was *Culture and practical reason* by Marshall Sahlins (1976). It did several things that were, to my mind, extraordinary—and stated in extraordinarily clear terms. It made the case against strict materialisms/rationalisms/Marxisms of all kinds, theoretical formulations that tended to reduce “culture” to little more than an epiphenomenal lapdog to prior practical/material/base constraints. It reminded me, for example, that as funny and compelling as Marvin Harris (1974) was to read, his cultural materialism couldn’t be construed as the only way to understand taboos and other social strictures. I could devour Lévi-Strauss without imagining I had to be a disciple of his form of structuralism (though I sometimes think that I haven’t escaped structuralism’s charms as much as I might have once imagined). And even as I have tried to push back a little against Clifford Geertz’s antifilmic championing of “thick description” (1973), recognizing that much of what I think about as my own approach to urban and visual anthropology wouldn’t make sense in the context of a precise reading of “interpretive anthropology,” Geertz’s rendition of taking the symbolic seriously—in terms that were irreducible to superstructures or simple functionalisms—gave me confidence to stray into the terrain my work trods in the manner it does (Jackson 2014).

I went to “the classics” for the first time in graduate school with embarrassing relish, and usually had to go back again and again because it took a while to understand anthropological prose. Still, it irked me to no end that even the 1980s’ *Writing culture* moment, which cast its brilliance on much of the critico-reflexive landscape that constituted the field I was being initiated into circa 1993, seemed unable to acknowledge people of color who should have been recognized as direct antecedents of its experimental writerly machinations. Ph.D. or not, if Zora Neale Hurston, one of Boas’ Columbia students, had been a white man pulling off the unconventional fiction and nonfiction work she was doing in the 1930s (e.g., [1938] 1990), novelist Alice Walker wouldn’t have had to find her unmarked grave and pluck her out of obscurity in the 1970s. Jim Clifford and George Marcus would have gotten there first in the long lead-up to their thinking about that canonical 1986 volume. (And Chicago-trained dance ethnographer Katherine Dunham would have probably made the cut, too.)

When I began to conduct my own ethnographic research in Harlem and Brooklyn, New York (Jackson 2001), and to write about what I thought I saw in the field, I also realized that those “dead white men” could be made to speak in other voices—and that was before I learned of Beverly Paschal Randolph, a free black man born in New York City in the early nineteenth century who actually channeled dead white men (as a spirit medium holding court in sometimes-swanky séances) so that those deceased figures, from Socrates to George Washington, could rail against the inhumanity of chattel slavery. I invoke Randolph quite a bit these days, as well as Hurston, along with many of the contemporary scholars of color working to reimagine what anthropological theorizing and representing entails in the twenty-first century.

None of that means that I don’t still go back to the classics. The point isn’t just to learn the canon for the sake of doing so. It is also to teach oneself about the unfurling of disciplinary possibility, the move from theory to theory, from debate to





debate—none of which we’ve resolved (not even nature vs. nurture), and most of which we rehash without even fully appreciating or understanding the contours of earlier iterations of the same tensions.

I’m most reminded of this when students balk at reading old anthropological texts about race in my classes these days, as though the only way to think about knowledge is as the relentless pursuit of something that inoculates us from the need to know what has already been thought on a subject. “Why do we have to read a racist like Carleton Coon?” One of my undergrads once asked me that questions during my office hours. “We know it is racist,” she went on. “Why subject students to that stuff?” An answer, though not the only one, is because versions of Coon’s arguments are still being made today, just in newfangled ways with more nuanced jargon and sophisticated technological accoutrements.

I remember taking a graduate course with Michael Taussig where he had us read between ten and twenty pages of Georges Bataille each week. That’s it. Close readings. Taussig had pored over the pieces so many times before that his version of the books looked as though they would disintegrate with the next touch. It was clear that every single time he reread “The big toe” or “The use value of D. A. F. de Sade,” he was both solidifying his earlier interpretations of the text and learning something brand new, only further enhanced by his interactions with relatively uninformed students trying to grapple with that unorthodox material for the first or second time.

It isn’t all that different from what I tell my graduate students interested in ethnographic filmmaking. There is incredible value in watching the same film many times. You haven’t really seen it, not truly, until you’ve watched it, say, ten times. Maybe more. At that point, you are no longer distracted by the surface maneuvers of characters or storylines, and you can begin to see the film with new eyes, without the obfuscations and distractions that overdetermine any first or second viewing. You are seeing beyond mere plot into the ways in which a narrative gets scaffolded and a film’s cameras/lenses get deployed to visualize a world into existence.

And almost any book you read—or film you watch—over and over again brings a certain amount of pleasure with each new engagement, the surprise of something not noticed before, the comfort of an analytical handle that can still be wielded to compelling effect. There is much about classic anthropological work that can feel foreign these days, especially those works that seem particularly silent on questions of “the political,” questions taken for granted within much of the discipline today. But even at their most ostensibly apolitical, the classics conjure up a way of sensing and making sense of complex cultural worlds that still has much to teach us as we recalibrate and reenchant its methods for the exigencies of our unpredictable and precarious times.

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John L. JACKSON, Jr., is Richard Perry University Professor and Dean of the School of Social Policy & Practice at the University of Pennsylvania.

John L. Jackson, Jr.  
Department of Anthropology  
University of Pennsylvania  
Museum, Room 325  
3260 South Street  
Pennsylvania  
Philadelphia, PA 19104  
USA  
jjackson@upenn.edu



SHORTCUTS

## Unsettling the classics

### On symptomatic readings and disciplinary agnosticism

Yarimar BONILLA, *Rutgers University*

I write this essay from the midst of research in posthurricane Puerto Rico. An odd site from which to think about anthropology's classics, perhaps, since places like Puerto Rico have traditionally occupied an awkward place within the discipline. Neither Western nor primitive, neither fish nor fowl, the Caribbean has always challenged the limits of what anthropology could and should be (Mintz 1973; Trouillot 1992). However, if one associates the disciplines with figures like those cited here, there is no better place from where to think about anthropology's past, and about how its future might depend on upending its traditions. It was precisely in Puerto Rico where in the late 1940s a cadre of young grad students, including Sidney Mintz and Eric Wolf, arrived to do research for what would become *The people of Puerto Rico* (Steward 1956). The goal of the project was to apply the methods of anthropology to a "complex society." Rather than coloring within the lines of the discipline, they sought to transform it, showing that anthropology need not be limited to the study of "primitive cultures" or constrained to small-scale societies and subnational communities (villages, tribes, etc.), which were until then often treated as discrete, self-contained units of analysis (Mintz 2001; Scott 2004). Along the way, they offered a unique exploration of how peasants were also proletarians, and of how Puerto Ricans were also US Americans.

One cannot say that the *The people of Puerto Rico* was guided by a decolonial orientation. Quite the contrary, it was the geopolitical imperatives of the 1940s postwar and decolonizing era—and the attendant rise of area studies and instrumentalization of social science research by the US government—which pushed anthropology away from "the primitive" and toward the study of the "modernizing"



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and the “developing” (Scott 2004). However, this move had a long-lasting impact on how we think about the nature of anthropology: its use for thinking about not just cultural preservation but cultural *change*, and what it can reveal about not just primitive economies but also highly industrial ones. In that spirit, I am stealing some time away from my fieldwork to engage in this collection, for which we were asked to ponder two shortcuts: “We must read the classics!” and “The classics are tainted by colonial history: ditch them!” I will try to address/question/unsettle each of these, keeping *The people of Puerto Rico* in the back of my mind.

### Shortcut #1: *Viva les classics!*

To begin, we should perhaps distinguish between the classics and the canon. Italo Calvino ([1991] 1999) defines classics as books we turn to again and again. But the sublimated question in his text is: Who is this collective “we”? The books I turn to again and again include *Sweetness and power* (Mintz 1985), *Silencing the past* (Trouillot 1995), and *Black skin, white masks* (Fanon 1952). These are the books that I am reluctant to pack away when I go on leave because I might “need” them. These are the ones that I’ve underlined at different times with different colored pens, and for which I’ve developed an elaborate color-coded system of post-it flags. But these are not necessarily the books I teach when I teach Introduction to Anthropology. These are not what I would call the canon.

*Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (Malinowski [1922] 2015), *Patterns of culture* (Benedict [1934] 2005) *The ritual process* (Turner [1966] 2011), and *The interpretation of cultures* (Geertz 1973) are some of the texts that I would consider “canonical” and which I would expect any student of cultural anthropology regardless of specialty to have some passing familiarity with. They should also read Fanon, Mintz, and Trouillot—of course!—but the purpose is different. I do not read the canon with an eye toward what it enables me to do, but rather to understand what it enabled anthropology *to be*. These texts need to be understood as products of their time, evidence of a particular “problem space,” as David Scott describes it: a shared commitment to a series of questions as the necessary ones, and to a series of answers as the appropriate ones (Scott 2005: 4) To see these texts as part of a particular problem space does not mean that we should imagine them as superseded. On the contrary, we should consider how those approaches reflect the (unspoken/unanalyzed) epistemic roots of the discipline.

### Where has culture gone?

This collection was sparked in part by a self-styled “rant” on HAU’s Facebook page (August 31, 2017) by Marshall Sahlins subtitled “Where have all the cultures gone?” in which he lamented not that graduate students were no longer reading the classics, but that they were no longer trained in catalogue knowledge of specific cultural practices: pig feasts, cross-cousin marriage, cannibalism, potlatches, and so on. Sahlins’ concern was that anthropologists were no longer the “custodians” of these cultural inventories. I think this preoccupation is actually quite different

from the question of whether or not (or how) we should read the classics. It is one thing to ask if grad students need to read Malinowski, and quite another to ask if grad students need to have fine-grained knowledge of the workings of the kula ring (as imagined by him).

It would be interesting to discuss how the “the kula” is as much (if not more) an artifact of anthropology than it is of Melanesia. To my mind, however, the more interesting question is: What worldview led anthropologists to imagine themselves as “custodians” of foreign cultural practices and (to be generous to Sahlins’ intentions) as the defenders of them? The answer is that this view is characteristic of “salvage anthropology”: an imperative driven by a perceived need to prove that “inferior races” and “primitive peoples” actually had complex life-worlds, that they had economies, forms of social organization, and belief systems—even if these did not resemble “ours.” This was the worldview of a time in which it was an open question whether these different lifeways should continue to exist, or whether instead primitive peoples should be forced to convert to “Western civilization.” Scholars of Native American culture, for example, felt the need to designate themselves the custodians of native cultures, because Native peoples were being forcibly placed in boarding schools and required to assimilate. This is why there was a perceived need to know and document these cultural practices—because they were not expected to persist.<sup>1</sup>

Anthropologists no longer fret about cataloging cultural inventories, because we know that these will persist within their communities, be it in practice or in lore, even as we also know that they will not necessarily persist on their own terms. For contemporary anthropologists, “culture” is thus no longer imagined as a discrete set of practices, rituals, kinship terms, or pottery patterns to be learned. Culture no longer exists in the plural, and it is not imagined to “go” anywhere. It is no longer a possession under threat, it is a *theory* about how those threats are produced, experienced, and fought off.

However, rather than simply waxing nostalgic for a previous orientation, or naively celebrating its demise, we should be critical about how and why new orientations succeeded the previous ones. What geopolitical imperatives led us away from the study of “primitive societies” and toward that of “developing” ones? How did decolonization and new forms of governance (led by international organizations rather than “empires”) lead some to proclaim that the new “savage slot” of anthropology is now the “suffering” one? And what new transformations are taking shape at this very moment when the state is increasingly imagined as carceral, punitive, and usurious? So, yes: let’s read the canon (i.e., what for some equals the classics), but let’s read it symptomatically, and not presume that its transformations are either organic or inherently progressive.

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1. It is worth restating that within this view of anthropology there was little place for the Caribbean; as a site without “pure products” or distinctively non-Western traditions, the Caribbean lacked the kind of “culture” salvage anthropologists were intent on preserving. As Mintz (1971) argues, the Caribbean was never a properly anthropological “cultural area,” but a societal one: defined more by common historical processes than by shared cultural traditions.

## Shortcut #2: Burn it all down!

In thinking about how to approach a colonial canon, one instinct is to jettison it. This is as much a product of its time as is the move to topple racist statues: both represent a particular approach to a problematic past that we have not fully superseded. However, as is the case with racist statues, simply removing them fails to address their relevance to the present and can inadvertently result in a nostalgic longing for their protection. (Just look at the debates over the changing of the blog *Savage Minds*, for example.)

In lieu of toppling monuments or ditching old texts, how can we engage our legacies critically? One approach would be to simply “balance things out.” As some suggest with monuments: we can place a statue of Frederick Douglass next to one of General Lee—and we can read W. E. B. Dubois alongside Lewis Morgan. Another option is to cherry pick: get rid of the evolutionists, the head measurers, the phrenologists, but keep texts that, although problematic, still have some redeeming qualities. I guess this would be the equivalent of toppling the statues of General Lee, but keeping those of Thomas Jefferson, since, even though he owned more slaves than Lee, he also wrote the Declaration of Independence. A third view, as I tried to argue above, is to read the canon differently, symptomatically, to use it as an entry point into the larger problem space in which it is inserted. Thus, the point is not to decolonize (for to what previous precolonial state would the cannon be returned?) but to unsettle it (Bonilla 2017). In other words: keep the statues, but subvert their meaning. Make them be didactic, rather than celebratory. Don’t silence the past; instead unsettle the silences through which that past was built.

## Letting go of illusions

In his contribution to the debate over Sahlins’ rant, Ghassan Hage (2017) suggests that we should only engage in enabling critiques of anthropology that are guided by respect and “*illusio*” for the discipline. Some have taken him to task for his call to respect elders, but what concerns me more is his insistence on preserving illusions. His call reminded me of the famous speech by Fidel Castro “*palabras a los intelectuales*” (words to intellectuals). It was here that Fidel uttered the famous phrase: “Against the revolution nothing, within the revolution everything!”

I’ve long been fascinated by this phrase for its ambiguous meaning: after all, how can scholars, writers, and artists (Fidel’s intended audience) explore “everything” when their ventures must be circumscribed by the stakes and orientations of a particular political end? Similarly, how can anthropologists be constrained to think and engage solely in ways that will safeguard the discipline? What if practicing the discipline leads us to reinvent, unsettle, and subvert its very terms?

When Sidney Mintz and Eric Wolf arrived in Puerto Rico to write their now classic texts, they were concerned not with preserving the discipline, but with pushing its limits. We should aim to do the same. Rather than being for or against the classics—“preserving the illusion,” or “burning it all down”—I believe that we should instead remain agnostic. Yes, we should read the classics. But we must be



prepared for our personal classics like Trouillot and Mintz to lead us down undisciplined paths. And, no, we should not just ditch the canon, but we must be ready to unsettle it, reimagine it, and approach its transformations with a critical eye. We should not be naïve in thinking that simply toppling the old racist statues will rid us of the imaginaries that built them, but neither should we let the monuments of the past constrain how we imagine and bring into being a new future.

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Yarimar BONILLA is Associate Professor of Anthropology and Latino/Caribbean Studies at Rutgers University. She is the author of *Non-sovereign futures: French Caribbean politics in the wake of disenchantment* (University of Chicago Press, 2015).

Yarimar Bonilla  
Department of Anthropology &  
Department of Latino/Caribbean Studies,  
Rutgers University  
131 George Street  
New Brunswick, NJ 08901  
USA  
[yarimar.bonilla@rutgers.edu](mailto:yarimar.bonilla@rutgers.edu)





## SHORTCUTS

# Reading the classics

## Ideology, tautology, and memory

Adia BENTON, *Northwestern University*

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In a 1986 *New York Review of Books* essay that would become the opening section of his 1991 book, Italo Calvino asks “Why read the classics?” He organizes his answer as a list of definitions. The items in the list blend into each other, deepening a case for reading books that “learned” people claim to have read, or are in the midst of rereading, of books they are ashamed—as a member of such a class of people—to have not read. Three of Calvino’s definitions, in particular, struck me:

- 1) The classics are the books of which we usually hear people say: “I am rereading . . .” and never “I am reading . . .”  
...
- 2) We use the word “classics” for those books that are treasured by those who have read and loved them; but they are treasured no less by those who have the luck to read them for the first time in the best conditions to enjoy them.  
...
- 3) The classics are books that exert a peculiar influence, both when they refuse to be eradicated from the mind and when they conceal themselves in the folds of memory, camouflaging themselves as the collective or individual unconscious.

A few thoughts, on the basis of these definitions: the classics might, in fact, be ideological. An imperative to enjoy the classics is also tautological. Essentially, it is a classic if you reread it, or pretend to because everyone else is doing it, or says you should; you (re)read it, or pretend to, because it is classic, and everyone else is doing it. A classic is classic because it is classic. If this feels like an oversimplification or a misrepresentation of Calvino’s argument, it is perhaps worth asking what is at stake for defining the set of “classics” or a canon for anthropology, and for whom.



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The question may not be whether “we” read the classics or not, but how a canon of classics comes into being and compels a social group to defend it.

Ideology, tautology, and the ephemera of memory appear to be at the heart of a recent debate about whether anthropologists need to celebrate, embrace, and protect something akin to an anthropological canon: it’s a canon of kula rings and potlatch and Azande witchcraft (the damned granary). The ideas have embedded themselves in anthropological memory, in the memories of anthropologists, touchstones for a common experience, a common body of knowledge. They exert influence, but they also inspire shame for those who have not had the opportunity or good fortune to have encountered them. Literary theorist and social analyst Pumla Dineo Gqola reminds us: shame of this kind, shame in which a person is made to felt inadequate, as a condition of his or her failure or inability to participate in such enterprises, is too often a function of oppression. Quoting Kenyan feminist activist and poet, Shailja Patel, she writes, “You want to understand how power works in any society, watch who is carrying the shame and who is doing the shaming” (Gqola 2015: 38).

The debate that started all of this was initiated by anthropological elder Marshall Sahlins, who lamented on *HAU*’s Facebook page (August 31, 2017) that younger scholars were no longer reading the classics, and had lost a set of anthropological competencies as a result: “The great majority don’t even know what a cross-cousin is, let alone what a cross-cultural knowledge of human kinship relations might consist of.” Imagine. The younger scholars who responded to him noted the position of privilege from which he wrote, and the blind spots that such privilege appears to generate. For many of us, the very idea that any critique of his position was unfair to him proved our point: an anthropological canon marginalized the perspectives of the very people who had been good enough to contribute to the anthropological “data set,” but were deemed unworthy or incapable of generating “theory.” They had been displaced from the very idea of a canon because of their social position within the hierarchies of disciplines, and the societies in which those canons had been established.

### Get off my lawn

Many came to Sahlins’ defense. *HAU* included reference to his extensive list of politically progressive publications spanning the decades—prompting many of us to reflect on how our progressive politics on paper may not match, or may even contradict, our political praxis. Ghassan Hage’s (2017) erudite Bourdieuan defense of Sahlins asked for us to buy into the “anthropological *illusio*,” based upon our pursuit of anthropology as something worth doing. He suggests that whiteness and colonialism suffuses the canon, but that does not make it an unworthy pursuit; that whiteness does not make it irredeemable or incapable of reform. It is likely that many of us find anthropology worth pursuing and worth doing, but want to decide terms under which we engage in the anthropological enterprise. Perhaps some of us would like to amend or even reject our commitment and accountability to anthropology as a discipline, but remain accountable to theorizing



about the human condition using its tools and the radical openness with which it purports to see the world.

It is perhaps notable that Hage's final point was an entreaty that we respect our elders—even if we don't agree with them. It seems to me that this point tries to evade the reason that anyone had to come to Sahlins' defense in the first place. The very act of disagreement—with Sahlins' notions of custodianship and the ontological status of an anthropological canon and skillset—signified disrespect. No, we don't all want to be the “custodians of [anthropological] knowledge” about Ojibwe ontology, the kula trade, Fijian cannibalism, or Azande witchcraft. And calling that custodial urge out for what it is, white privilege and white (masculinist) saviorism, is in fact not simply disagreement on dissenters' part, but a lack of respect for—rejection of, really—a position that centers whiteness and its centrality to such projects.

Together, Sahlins' “rant” (as it has been described on HAU's Facebook page and elsewhere) and Hage's rejoinder promoted the anthropological version of “get off my lawn,” an American cultural idiom roughly glossed as accusing the young for interloping on the secure existence one (usually an older white man) has established for oneself. “Get off my lawn” can be an ageist punchline, but it is more provocatively understood as a critique of exclusionary boundary making, of racialized, gerontocratic bourgeois gatekeeping. In literal terms, it refers to the (white, male) older homeowner who has worked so meticulously to cultivate his lawn that any trespass against it—usually by young folks who carelessly trample on this hallowed, manicured ground—constitutes egregious disrespect and transgression. “I've worked to own this home, to maintain this yard; how dare you transgress its boundaries? You have not been invited here. When you are invited, you come here on my terms.” Get off my lawn.

What can be done to counter this “get-off-my-lawnism”? Shall we doggedly pursue decolonization of the canon, as many have urged that we do? If anything, we are as invested as ever in the canon when we aim to “decolonize” it. Decolonizing, as my colleague Yarimar Bonilla (2017) has argued, centers the colonial project, and suggests a teleology in which there's a precolonial condition to which we can return. I, like Bonilla, wonder if it is ever possible to “decolonize” something that has its roots in the colonial project: she asks if “unsettling” might better describe attempts to shake off the chains of a colonial legacy, and reimagine our disciplinary practices and agendas.

## What would Mary Douglas do?

I took my problem to British social anthropologist Paul Richards, who was in town for the African Studies Association meeting, and had come to Northwestern University (where I currently work). He was visiting to talk about a book he coauthored with Perri 6, which chronicles the work of Mary Douglas (Richards and Perri 6 2017). It fills in the blanks of her long career and fragmented, but also extensive, social theories. During the question-and-answer session, I told him about this current essay, which I had, perhaps unwittingly, agreed to write. Richards seemed to think I was asking what Mary Douglas would do. And he responded, as if channeling her spirit: “Mary would probably ask what kinds of social orders produce

a canon in the first place. The problem isn't whether we should read it or not, but what kinds of societies produce and *need* canons." Our canons—our classics—come to us, handed down, as if by decree, from our anthropological elder kin. In my anthropology training at Harvard, we read Evans-Pritchard and Radcliffe-Brown; Boas and Geertz; Benedict and Mead. But we did not read Zora Neale Hurston, Elliott P. Skinner, or W. E. B. DuBois.

As foundational as it was for many disciplines trying to understand the social sorting so fundamental to our societies, a US press known for its Africanist anthropology (and its enthusiasm for anthropological canon) rejected the book on Douglas that Richards had coauthored. As a British social anthropologist who had trained with Evans-Pritchard and wrote an influential book about the Lele of Belgian Congo, Douglas belonged to an intellectual kin network that has generally elevated her and her work to canonical status. I doubt that the book was rejected because it wasn't good or was perceived to be of little interest to anthropologists; rather, I suspect that the subject of the book—Mary Douglas—did not fit into a small group of gatekeepers' ideas about who should or should not be canonized. They questioned whether it made sense to contextualize, acknowledge, or celebrate her contributions to anthropological theory. But maybe I'm wrong. What I do know is that a powerful (woman) admirer of Douglas' work at another press ushered the book to print.

## Lose your kin

In the throes of planning for a required course for a cross-field graduate seminar on "The field," I explained to my archaeologist colleague that I was planning to write an essay about whether we should celebrate "the classics" or "the canon" for ethnographic theory. In our conversation, I casually dismissed the idea of defending the classics on the grounds that they were classics. His response was useful. He asked, "If the thing that unites us is common ancestors, who would your ancestors be? Don't you need them?"

"I guess that depends," I replied. Do you think we are *born* to ancestors, or do we get to choose the people we are descended from?"

"Yes. Yes, I think we choose them."

If our "classics" are in essence the traces of our intellectual kin, and if we elect our kin, if we choose our affiliations and whom we "belong to," then we need to seriously consider what that means. Maybe we should lose our kin, as literary scholar Christina Sharpe (2016), writing in the aftermath of the election of white nationalist, Donald Trump, has asked us to do. She was addressing those of us Americans who would be confronted with the possibility of having to share Thanksgiving or Christmas dinner with a relative who espoused Trump's views and supported his white supremacist agenda. Noting how chattel slavery in the United States was foundational to and reproduced through kin and ideas of property, ownership and race, rather than an aberration, Sharpe writes:

One must be willing to be more than uncomfortable. One must be willing to be on the outside. One must refuse to repair a familial rift



on the bodies cast out as not kin. Slavery is the ghost in the machine of kinship. Kinship relations structure the nation. Capitulation to their current configurations is the continued enfleshment of that ghost. Refuse reconciliation to ongoing brutality. Refuse to feast on the corpse of others. Rend the fabric of the kinship narrative. Imagine otherwise. Remake the world. Some of us have never had any other choice.

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Adia BENTON is an Assistant Professor of Anthropology and African Studies at Northwestern University.

Adia Benton  
Department of Anthropology  
Northwestern University  
1810 Hinman Avenue  
Evanston, IL 60208  
USA  
[adia.benton@northwestern.edu](mailto:adia.benton@northwestern.edu)



SHORTCUTS

## You can't walk where there is no ground

Paul STOLLER, *West Chester University*

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Early during my fieldwork among Songhay sorcerers in the Republic of Niger, I often tried to accelerate the pace of my education. Like most neophyte anthropologists, I had a limited amount of research time and a rapidly dwindling research budget. Would I be able to generate enough ethnographic data to complete my thesis and earn my doctorate?

My teacher, Adamu Jenitongo, had a very different view of how I should learn about Songhay sorcery. He insisted on teaching me at what seemed—to me, at least—a glacial pace. We routinely held our middle of the night study sessions in his spirit hut, a space that he filled with precious ritual objects—hatchets encased in red leather with bells attached to the hatchet heads; tiny sandals for the *Atakurma*, the elves of the bush; the sorcerer's *lolo* or staff of power, a four-foot iron pole also encased in red leather on to which a score of blood-caked rings, larger preceding smaller, had long ago been pushed into position. In this wondrously evocative setting that raised so many “important” questions, Adamu Jenitongo insisted that we take very small steps onto the path of Songhay sorcery. Typically, we might take up several lines of an incantation—for perhaps twenty minutes.

Well, that's enough for now, he'd say. Come back tomorrow night.

But, Baba, I need to know what those lines mean, I insisted.

He'd laugh. You're always in such a hurry. It takes time to learn these things. I'm building for you a foundation, Paul, and we need to make sure it's as solid as the ground. It takes a long time to build a good foundation.

But I don't have the time.

Then you must be patient. When things are right, your path will open. Always remember this, my son: you can't walk where there is no ground.



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This short essay is a plea for a slower anthropology in which we recognize—and debate—the foundational contributions of our disciplinary ancestors. As a young scholar, I didn't always have a penchant for the slow study of the anthropological classics. Indeed, before that fateful night when Adamu Jenitongo introduced me to the “you can't walk where there is no ground” proverb, I found the study of anthropological classics time-consuming, irrelevant, and annoying—something you had to “struggle through” on the path to an intellectual future. In graduate school, there was no shortage of what seemed dusty and deadly classics to read. When I studied linguistics, the professors insisted that we read Ferdinand de Saussure's *Cours de linguistique generale* ([1916] 2011), one of the driest, most tedious texts imaginable. Having digested that *texte classique*, we moved on to Leonard Bloomfield's *Language* ([1935] 1984), Nikolai Trubetzkoy's *Principles of phonology* (1969), and Roman Jakobson's *Selected writings* (1971–85). Having consumed the principal texts of structural linguistics, we dove into transformational grammar, making our way through Noam Chomsky's *Syntactic structures* ([1955] 1968) and *Aspects of the theory of syntax* (1964). When I moved over to social anthropology, a new crew of professors proved to be no less enthusiastic about the classics. We read Lewis Henry Morgan and Sir James Frazer. We discussed the fine points of Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922), Firth's *We, the Tikopia* (1936), Radcliffe-Brown's *The Andaman Islanders* (1922) and Mauss' *The gift* ([1925] 2016). We explored the tangled bank of Gregory Bateson's iconoclastic thoughts in *Naven* (1958) and debated the whys and wherefores of Ruth Benedict's *Patterns of culture* (1934). We also read Lévi-Strauss, with special emphasis on *The elementary structures of kinship* ([1949] 1969) and *The savage mind* (1966). When it came time for me to take a Ph.D. qualifying exam on Africanist anthropology, my committee presented me a list of eighty titles to devour, many of them classics from British anthropology, including Meyer Fortes' (1949, 1959) books on the Tallensi of Ghana, Siegfried Nadel's (1942) volume on the Nupe of Nigeria, Mary Douglas' (1963) ethnography of the Lele of Congo, Audrey Richards' (1939) study of the Bemba in what is today Zimbabwe, not to forget Monica Wilson's venerable work *Good company* (1951) on the Nyakyusa of Tanzania. Because I had proposed to work in Francophone Africa, my committee insisted that I read many of the classics of French Africanist scholarship—Griaule's *Masques dogons* (1938), *Dieu d'eau (Conversations avec Ogotemelli)* (1948), and *Méthode de l'ethnographie* (1957), Leiris' *Afrique fantôme*, Dieterlen's *Essai sur la religion Bambara* (1951), and, of course, Rouch's *La religion et la magie Songhay* (1960).

By the time I arrived in Niger to begin field studies among the Songhay people, I possessed a broad knowledge of the classics in anthropology and linguistics, but had no firm idea how such knowledge might help me understand, let alone write about, the Songhay world. In the field, I collected data on kinship, patterns of economic exchange, elements of social change. I also observed Songhay spirit possession ceremonies and witnessed sorcerous rituals. I recorded Friday mosque sermons and taped-recorded the talk of spirits as they spoke through the bodies of their mediums. Deeply engaged in fieldwork, I rarely thought of all those anthropological classics that I had so diligently consumed.



Then late one night, Adamu Jenitongo, annoyed at my impatience, told me: you can't walk where there is no ground.

That moment began the slow evolution of my comprehension of things Songhay. Adamu Jenitongo taught me incantations and showed me the plants he used to heal people of both village (physical) and bush (spirit) illnesses. But he refused to explain how the incantations worked or where to find the plants. When I asked about these matters, he said:

Your path will open. I've given you the foundation of our work. I've pointed you in the right direction. If you're serious, you'll find your way. It will take time, but one day, when you're ready, you'll take what you've learned here and put it to work in your own life. Your mind, he said, will ripen with experience, and then and only then will you understand the world.

At the time, I didn't completely understand his message. As the Songhay like to say, the mind ripens—albeit slowly—with age. In my case, years of conducting field research in West Africa and New York City, years of thinking about sorcery and the limits of the possible and years of confronting serious illness have brought to the surface a few central principles about the acquisition and custodianship of Songhay knowledge. These are insights that have gradually emerged from the foundation that Adamu Jenitongo long ago set for me.

1. The young mind is nimble, quick and energetic. It is ready to learn fundamentals that construct a foundation of knowledge.
2. As we age, the mind becomes ready to better understand what we have learned. It is ready to put that knowledge into practice.
3. Elders are the masters of their practices, but also the custodians of knowledge.
4. The elders' greatest obligation is to preserve and refine that knowledge and then pass it on to practitioners in the next generation, who will preserve and refine the knowledge in their own way.

This slow and wise West African epistemology has been the foundation of my anthropological practice. In hindsight, I am grateful to my teachers who long ago required me to read, think, and write about the anthropological classics. Like all classics, they are imperfect. They mostly emerged from colonial contexts that underscore a sullied past of political, social, and racial injustice. Despite these imperfections, however, these are texts, to paraphrase Lévi-Strauss, that are "good to think with." As such, they are texts that remain open to the world. They constitute, at least for me, a foundation from which anthropologists can continue to build a strong disciplinary edifice. Through this process we change our practices and refine our thoughts, all while taking custody of the knowledge we are charged to preserve. Once preserved and refined, we set it as the foundation for the next generation of scholars, who, in turn, take up the obligation to continue the practice.

I like to say that I sit on the shoulders of my mentors—Jean Rouch and Adamu Jenitongo. Everything I have written is a testament to the foundation they carefully set for me. And yet my path, which emerges from their thoughts and practices, is not their path. This foundation—of classical knowledge, classical practices, and classical texts—marks a beginning not an end. Rooted in the knowledge that we are

part of a venerable tradition, we are not alone as we set out in various directions to find our way in an increasingly complex and troubled world.

If an edifice has no foundation, it crumbles.

You can't walk where there is no ground.

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Paul STOLLER is Professor of Anthropology at West Chester University.

*Paul Stoller*  
*Department of Anthropology-Sociology*  
*West Chester University*  
*West Chester, PA 19383*  
*USA*