“Real Anthropology” and Other Nostalgias

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Imagine it. You are there, in the Department of Anthropology on any one of a number of college campuses in the United States, circa 1974. Clifford Geertz’s recently published *The Interpretation of Cultures* has made it past the standard-bearers of political economy, past the guardians of waning structuralist truths, and into a graduate-student reading group.¹ No one knows yet whether the discipline will turn in the direction of meaningful explication or veer off in search of more easily replicable projects.

Students emerge from the reading group intellectually invigorated, duly impressed, but as nervous about their career options as you have ever seen them. “If this is the future of anthropology, what is to become of us?” one of them asks. “After all, we can’t all write like Geertz.” As, of course, we can’t.

In those corridors of circumscribed power, the halls outside the faculty offices, other objections are raised: What separates thick description from phenomenology? From literature? From good journalism? Is this (really) anthropology? Objections that double as a warning: beware the interpretive method, for it has the power to entice you away from the kind of “real” ethnographic inquiry that drew you to anthropology in the first place.

Today, when uncertainty about the field’s labors and prospects still reigns, it is worth remembering these early attempts to locate what would later be called “interpretive anthropology” outside the boundaries of the discipline. Perhaps those early critics mistook anthropology’s impending turn to meaning for a rhetorical twist, their anxieties inflamed by an Aristotelian understanding of rhetoric as an art of seduction.² In the late 1990s, Renato Rosaldo still had to argue against the facile literalism that would reduce interpretive ethnography to the notion that “all the world’s a text.”³ Interpretation requires an intimate grasp of empirical context. Like
peripheral vision, context is notoriously difficult to narrate, since once sustained examination nudges the peripheral toward the center, there is no longer anything con(tr)a)textual about it.

Whatever interpretive anthropology’s shortcomings, it never proposed to be a strictly rhetorical move. Yet there may have been more than a grain of insight in the association of interpretive anthropology with rhetoric and with the necessary seductions that separate a well-conceived argument from a compelling one. Interpretive anthropology has engendered a new respect for modes of presentation, modes of intellectual production, if you will, as well as widespread recognition of the inevitability that the ethnographer will have a hand in shaping and selecting “data.”

However one may differ with the questions, the emphases, and the theoretical apparatus embedded in the interpretive turn, its impact on the discipline is no longer in doubt. If nothing else, it has certainly become anthropology. These days, the phrase “real anthropology” seeks other targets, when it does not dissolve into irony altogether. Are studies of television “real anthropology”? Studies of shopping? Advertising? Postcolonial fiction? Migration in search of work? Protests against the latest round of World Trade Organization meetings? The emergence of “gay” organizations in Jakarta? The emergence of a technology-driven bourgeoisie in Bangalore? Or is it, as I have argued elsewhere, the study by a person whose body is understood to have a naturalized, “native” connection to the topic at hand that often tends to elicit such doubts?4

More than a quarter of a century after the publication of The Interpretation of Cultures, a colleague who employs the term “real anthropology” is now more likely to elicit a rolling of the eyes, an exchange of knowing glances, perhaps even a chuckle. After all, anthropology has entered an era that requires the discipline to respond to changing circumstances by developing a range of new specialties, each of them vying for legitimacy, none with any particular purchase on the real. Or has it?

These days, many of us would like to consider ourselves intellectually sophisticated about the high stakes that people invest in claims to authenticity. Ethnographers jockey to position themselves at some remove from any allegiance to “the real.” If the real world is symbolically mediated, everywhere and always, so must be the compartments of study that historically have organized the field.5 But when it comes time to retool the discipline, how far gone is that allegiance to authenticity, really?

There is a certain nostalgia embedded in the phrase “real anthropology,” a nostalgia that references an earlier (not just more authentic) time in which anthropologists understood their work and went about it with an
almost utopian clarity of purpose. “Real anthropology” is a backward-looking term, floated on beliefs, however vaguely or well substantiated, about the way things used to be for practitioners of the discipline. As such, the term encodes a certain historical consciousness, a particular understanding of the way anthropology was done in the imaginary era when Big Men were Big Men and ethnographers were ethnographers, when expeditions were well funded, when Self and Other stayed separate and stayed put.

That bygone (if never quite existent) world, for all its flux, is imagined to have granted a stability to the discipline that presumably is absent today. In those good or bad old days, the globe could be neatly demarcated into discrete societies without the pesky areas of overlap and confusion introduced by the space-time compression of jet travel and satellite communications. In the old days, people under study were supposed to be too preoccupied with their own alleged vanishing (i.e., the colonial assault) to offer critiques of the latest monographs written about them. In the old days, the authority of the anthropologist remained intact, his or her identity secure in the grasping individualism that informed claims to “my village” or yours. Topics of specialization lined up in an orderly fashion: kinship, politics, religion, economy, and any other structural-functional categories required to exhaust the possibilities of human endeavor. Or so the story goes.

Shadowing this imagined disciplinary past is a vision of the contemporary, no less oversimplified, no less the product of a volatile mix of political economy and memory. Today’s areas of specialization appear more transient: this year, intellectual property; next year, biotechnologies; the following year—who can tell? The “trans” in this “transience” begins to organize topics of inquiry: transcultural symbolic forms, transracial adoption, transnational capital flows, transgender communities, translocal movements of resistance, each with an implicit emphasis on historical discontinuities.

Embedded in the contrast between the simpler time represented by “real anthropology” and the seemingly wider range of studies that now fall within anthropology’s purview is an element of mourning for the orderliness, the predictability, indeed the discipline, presumed to characterize the field in days gone by. Or the reverse: an element of celebration that forgets to consider the possibility that anthropology’s current expansiveness—its apparent readiness to embrace all and sundry—may be overrated. In either case, nostalgia filters out irony. Imagine attributing
stability to a field at the very phase of its development when it had undertaken as its project the study of forms of living that appeared to ethnographic eyes to be rapidly passing from this world! Such are the dangers of sentiment, be they of loss or self-congratulation.

“Real anthropology” was, and remains, a disciplinary term. Its invocation implies that in recent times, when anthropology has stumbled from grace, some policing of the boundaries of the discipline is necessary to separate acceptable from unacceptable topics or methods of study. And although the overt injunction to pursue “real anthropology” seems to have fallen out of fashion, the backward-looking glance encoded in the phrase is very much alive. The policing embedded in the phrase too remains very much an ongoing, everyday occupation in an occupation that has come to perceive itself as embattled. Even as colleagues appear to abandon “real anthropology” to contemporary sophistication and wit, even as the laughter that greets the phrase is offered up to the gods of change, the notion of real anthropology reemerges as a more generalized nostalgia that continues to afflict the field.

In the United States at least, nostalgia for the golden era of anthropology must be placed in the context of a wider fascination with all things retro at this latest turn of a century. From wooden roller coasters to martinis, from the rehabilitation of aging disco stars to the renewed popularity of Harley-Davidson motorcycles, yesterday’s passé has become chic. But to treat the infusion of nostalgia into discussions of the remaking of anthropology solely as a matter of style would stop short of a fuller understanding of the dynamics entailed. For there is also a political and economic context to the debates about what is to become of this field.

In the United States, such debates are often informed by the perception that anthropology is engaged in a struggle for institutional survival. Within the North American academy, anthropology is considered a small field, relegated to the margins by administrators and publishers alike. Even in periods of economic expansion, departments regularly face funding cuts and have difficulty securing authorization for new hires. Some of this can be attributed to the restructuring of higher education more generally, but anthropology still seems to lose out relative to many other disciplines. Times have changed since 1877, when the secretary of the Smithsonian Institution characterized anthropology as “the most popular branch of science.”

In a development that shows that history does not lack for humor, anthropology would now appear to have traded ideological places with its onetime subjects of study. The fear that fuels nostalgia is precisely this:
what if anthropologists themselves have joined the ranks of the vanishing? Even those, such as Marc Augé, who beg to disagree, seek to assuage this concern. “The idea defended here,” writes Augé in *An Anthropology for Contemporaneous Worlds*, “is that social anthropology, by the very fact of its self-critical tradition, is fully capable of adapting itself to the accelerated change.” In the shadows of such passages hovers a threat to the discipline that must be repelled, whether through “adaptation,” innovation, or disavowal.

If ever there was evidence that a cursory review of Talal Asad’s collection *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* has proved insufficient to dispatch anthropology’s entanglement with colonialism, it is this: observe the means by which many of us have attempted to fight these disquieting trends. Two ghostly reminders—remainders—of colonization come to mind. Call the first flag-planting; the second mapmaking.

The flag-planting approach asks anthropologists to stake an exclusive claim to particular methodologies or concepts, all, of course, in the name of saving the discipline. Ethnography becomes a distinctively anthropological practice with a long academic pedigree, and pity the poor sociologist who has only lately discovered it. Culture is “our” concept, and damn any cultural-studies type who tries to claim it for his or her own. This is a possessive idiom with a history of rough service in land conflicts and trademark disputes, given new life in the fields of intellectual inquiry.

The mapmaking approach to disciplinary salvation mobilizes colleagues to map out a host of new topics with bright red boundaries and then rush to christen them subfields. Mapmaking can carry its own nostalgias: for systematicity, for organic harmonies, for the comprehensiveness of conquest. There are good arguments to be made, of course, for arriving at categories of convenience to demarcate intellectual labor. But why the rush?

To date, there has been relatively little discussion of the advantages and disadvantages associated with the reifications required to produce specific subdisciplines. Nor have we as anthropologists bothered to distinguish carefully between emergent nodes of inquiry, where scholarly interests coincide, and a more rigid organization into subfields, which tend to have a long half-life in job ads and thus in the organization of departments. Subdisciplines, once disseminated and legitimated, require time to dismantle. (Witness the hardness of “international development” in the face of the withering critique of modernization theory.) When it comes to reification, it behooves anthropology to take its institutional time.
Two cases in point that bear upon my own scholarship involve the inauguration of “the new kinship studies” and “sexuality studies.” The implication that today’s study of familial ideologies, reproductive technologies, and so on is a new variant of the old, or at least a departure from something already established and well known, sidelines some of the more productive aspects of the critique that David Schneider and others leveled at the concept of kinship itself. At its best, that critique opened possibilities for thinking afresh about the forms of human solidarity, not to mention thinking across the lines of received analytic categories. Perhaps kinship is not a given, much less a subdivision, the sort of “thing” you can follow through its changes because you know it when you see it. Perhaps the assumptions that qualify certain topics for study under the rubric of “kinship” bear further scrutiny, now as then. Why not suspend closure long enough to build creatively upon that disciplinary break?

Likewise, the establishment of a settled something called “sexuality studies” relies upon an Anglo-European category (sexuality) of relatively recent vintage that incorporates a plethora of assumptions about gender, practice, and personhood. To be sure, “sexuality” is a term now widely used outside Europe and North America, but often with very different semiotics and syntax. What does that subdivision give us and what does it demand, especially in terms of its regulatory effects?

To be clear: I am thrilled to see scholarship flourish in these areas, a development that I have supported at some professional cost. What becomes problematic is a preemptory haste to reorganize the discipline in lieu of engaging in the necessary interrogation of the terms used to map out a subfield’s borders. That sort of reification can lock down inquiry, leading analysts away from precisely the kind of thick description and even thicker explanations required. Any rush to christen subfields accordingly risks falling into ethnonostalgia, a naive alliance of relativism and empiricism that asks how the So-and-Sos conceive of sex, how the Such-and-Suches do kinship “these days,” still safely ensconced over there, even if “over there” now takes the shape of a fertility clinic in Bangkok or an ecotourism project in Mozambique. Ethnonostalgia will place any fledgling subfield at odds with the work required to theorize border crossings.

Both flag-planting and mapmaking ride the wave of nostalgia by attempting to reinscribe boundaries at the very historical moment that celebrates the hybrid and the “trans.” Both flag-planting and mapmaking rest their case on the preservationist conviction that foundations, administrators, and the like will treat things old and preferably unique (culture, ethnographic method) as something worth conserving. Should that not come
to pass, with the marketing of a limited number of concepts and methods as "anthropology’s," perhaps brand recognition can do the rest: "Coming soon, for a limited time only, from the folks who brought you ‘culture’ . . ."

Like all nostalgias, this yearning to develop strategies that will return us to an age of remuneratively employed ethnographers and neatly bounded disciplinary objects cannot be satisfied. It represents an unattainable desire, in part because, as Gilles Deleuze reminds us, repetition yields difference, not sameness. Today’s candidates for the title of subfields do not represent parallel categories even to Euro-American ways of thinking. The scarcely intuited yearning for return is also unattainable because, like all nostalgias, it is based on an airbrushed reading of the past. Anthropology has never been so stable nor hardly so neat.

At the same time, there is reason to take these nostalgias seriously, both for their instigation—after all, the moves to withdraw institutional support are real enough—as well as for the specificity of the longings they entail. Not all aspects of disciplinary history have come into view with that backward glance.

Where have the current nostalgias tended to focus? As discussed above, on the re-creation of subfields, on the search for distinctive concepts and methodologies, buttressed by reverential nods to the unprecedented complexity of it all. (A lingering narrative of modernity, surely.) One might equally well ask where the current nostalgias have hesitated to roam. At one time, appeals to “science” provided considerable institutional leverage: anthropology is real science, hard science, our forebears argued, and thus worthy of financial support. Among sociocultural anthropologists today, one sees little desire to go back to that way of self-styling the discipline.

By the last quarter of the twentieth century, the association of science in anthropology with sociobiological reductionism had largely relegated interest in the theoretical contributions of math and science to biological anthropology. I am not speaking here of the many insightful ethnographic studies of laboratories and scientific communities, of course. Nor do I mean to overlook the growing number of studies of the ways that medicine and technology figure in popular culture. I have in mind something rather different: the noticeable lack of interdisciplinary dialogue across the lines of anthropology, science, and mathematics for the purposes of elaborating analytic frameworks. Our latest nostalgias have not carried us there.

Within sociocultural anthropology, the historical reaction against modeling the discipline on “hard” science included a move to break away from
systemic accounts, replicable generalizations, and rule-bound analyses, as well as the formal mathematical symmetries encoded in structuralist analyses. In this sense, the turn toward interpretive anthropology also represented a turn away from science and mathematics as such. Yet this refusal targeted a kind of science that was then already outdated. The science that sociocultural anthropology rejected was thoroughly Newtonian in its search for generalizable rules or laws. The mathematics that sociocultural anthropology rejected was thoroughly Euclidean in its restriction to two or three dimensions. Yet the same kind of discredited or at least superseded geometric space that allowed Claude Lévi-Strauss to chart his myths continues unobtrusively to shape avant-garde social science metaphors: borders, lines, intersections, levels, scales, points, grids, and of course the “trans” that introduces transverse and transept as well as transnational.

While anthropology set its interpretive course, the scientific and mathematical disciplines were experiencing a qualitative turn of their own. Rather than casting the universe in the image of law, their students had to grapple with the implications of non-Euclidean geometries and post-Einsteinian physics. What to make of broken symmetry, closed timelike curves, twists in spacetime, boundary conditions, wormholes, infinite speeds, four-dimensional creatures, or a runaway universe? What would, could, anthropology make of the same? Rejuvenated metaphors, to be sure, as well as an opportunity to move interdisciplinary scholarship in rather different directions.

In some of my own work, for example, I have gone to the history of mathematics to trace the diasporic travels of the concept of zero, and then used the zero to develop a less fetishized, more temporally situated approach to gender than those most prevalent in gender theory. Time-travel paradoxes allowed me to attempt to articulate the relationship between the production of gender, historical memory, and modernity in new and less naturalized ways.

More generally, a dialogue with science provides a useful way of identifying Newtonian and Euclidean categories that tacitly continue to structure our thinking. No need to be a math whiz to cross this particular line or, as Euclid’s successors might say, to double back upon the discipline like a Möbius strip. Some of the most revered scientists of this generation have taken the time to set down accounts of their fields in words accessible to a numerate but not necessarily number-crunching audience. The concepts that inform contemporary scientific theory remain culture-bound, no doubt, equally entangled in bids for institutional funding, but for all
that, the ears of most anthropologists are less accustomed to them. That is why I often find these concepts valuable for augmenting a sense of what anthropology would and could be.

There are other tundra zones besides science where lightly equipped nostalgias cannot long endure exposure. Anthropology’s colonial history is one. When it comes to colonialism, a sense of “been there, critiqued that” reigns. Few hurry to make a pilgrimage back to what are now commonly understood as sites of disciplinary shame. In an eagerness to put the nasty business of the discipline’s implication in colonial regimes behind “us,” many current practitioners assign colonialism to the past. But anthropology’s colonial history is also current history, in the sense that the discipline has work left undone in the wake of only partially realized colonial critiques. These critiques are partial in the sense of necessarily remaining incomplete, yet their incomplete realization is also partial in the more problematic sense characterized by split and attenuated political loyalties.

To understand such partiality, consider David Scott’s tripartite division of colonial critiques into problem-spaces of the anticolonial, the postcolonial, and “after postcoloniality.” By problem-spaces, Scott means a set of historically linked questions and answers that emerged in response to changing political and economic circumstances. Within anthropology, anticolonial critique incorporated an account of Anglo-European expansion framed in part by the discourse of nationalist movements. Ethnographers who colluded with colonial administrators in Africa, researchers who worked for the CIA in Vietnam, a discipline institutionally rooted in the metropole—these were the targets of anticolonial critique, sometimes coupled with the political demand that anthropologists “go home,” in effect opening up the space for subalterns to offer (or refuse) accounts of their “own” societies.

Postcolonial criticism brought with it a revaluation of rhetoric and representation that in many cases still begs to be applied. As anthropologists recognized the subordination built into a term such as informant, for example, they began to speak of collaborators and coparticipants, newly allotted a “voice” in the text. The monumentality accorded to this shift was clearly not the product of war, since as anyone in wartime will tell you, there is an invisibly fine line between informing and collaboration. Rather, the postcolonial critique within anthropology emerged during the years following the nationalist wars for independence, when nation-states set about establishing and consolidating their polities. Subsequently, ethnographers have had to come to terms with the fact that anyone in a position to give
textual shape to a voice remains positioned as a presiding officer of a sort, to the detriment of any pretensions to equality between researcher and researched. And if, after so much experimentation, ethnographic modes of writing are still so very often found uncongenial by those they purport to describe, then the field still has some work to do to figure out why. “Virtual anthropologists” have much to teach in this regard. As the ethnographers that well-meaning colleagues judge to be “natives studying themselves,” virtual anthropologists have no chance to become “real anthropologists” in the nostalgic sense of the term. Yet they too are implicated—albeit differently—in colonial discourse.¹⁷

As for a critique “after postcoloniality,” it has barely begun. To pursue such a reformulated critique would require the discipline to open more inquiries into the ways that colonialism helped generate the terrain on which collaboration, resistance, and indeed ethnography become possible.¹⁸ One example can be found in Mel Tappé’s study of the race politics of sickle-cell anemia.¹⁹ Tappé could simply have exposed the collusion of doctors, anthropologists, and government administrators in setting up the testing programs that transformed sickle-cell anemia into a marker of racial or ethnic identity (an anticolonial critique). Or he could simply have set about identifying the assumptions embedded in representations of sickness, ethnicity, and so forth that furthered colonial domination (a postcolonial critique). The critique “after postcoloniality” develops when Tappé goes on to consider the ways that technologies, research programs, colonial administrative practices, and the isolation of “sickle cell” as a disease entity combined to shape a terrain on which nationalist movements as well as contemporary discourses of modernity would later build.

In the broadest sense, a critique of the field after postcoloniality would have to supply historical context for the kinds of questions that have preoccupied anthropologists who do not define themselves as working on colonialism per se. And what kind of politics would follow from that?

In addition to nostalgias ventured and nostalgias abjured, there are latent nostalgias that are no less powerful because they elude naming as such. Methodological discussions are loaded with assumptions about what constitutes ethnography, even at its most innovative. Embedded in many usages of the term ethnography is a certain reverence for the way things used to be, when face-to-face meant a few strides away rather than Webcams at two ends of an Internet hookup, when fieldwork meant immersion in a fixed place rather than a series of mobile encounters strategically designed to create a research space. Pick up any university-press catalog with a significant anthropology list, and you will see advertisements that
play on this longing: “For those who still believe anthropology means ethnography . . .”

Techniques developed to study across boundaries—disciplinary or otherwise—still often assume a relatively stable form of ethnography that can be conducted in manifold sites. In George Marcus’s perceptive schema, multi-sited ethnographies can be grouped according to what they follow from place to place or space to space: the people, the thing, the plot, the metaphor, the conflict. What and where the anthropologist follows seems to overshadow discussion of what he or she might do differently having “arrived” at multiple destinations.

Even as such ethnographies depart from older fieldwork designs, some of the best exemplars of this trend continue to rely on a site-specific, community-based model of ethnography. Not that these studies are unimportant. Anthropology would be the poorer without Roger Rouse’s ingenious conceptualization of transnational migration circuits and Brenda Jo Bright’s work on the ways that Chicano lowriders customize the mass-produced commodities that are their cars. Perhaps, though, multi-sited ethnography offers only a bridge from the bounded communities of an imagined past to a future that seems much harder to dream. These ethnographies rest, after all, on an operation of multiplication that keeps the notion of field sites, if not a field site, intact, even unto the metaphor of the global village. So how far have we moved, methodologically speaking, from “village anthropology” by way of an exercise that leaves the terms of investigation undisturbed, yielding village-as-villages, village-as-corporate-boardroom, village-as-scientific-lab?

If we as anthropologists take a more critical stance toward the nostalgic impulse to make the discipline “real” again, we can do so in the confidence that what really makes something anthropology is neither a certain object nor a certain method, but rather a kind of engagement that can have been produced only by the history of a discipline, this discipline. Such an engagement applies equally well to a conversation, an observation, an interview, a text. It represents knowledge of a sort unlikely to be ventured by the historian or, if you like my vision of interdisciplinarity, by the physicist sitting beside you in a study group. The engagement that is anthropology is a matter of the framing of topics and questions brought to bear, a matter of that unfinished colonial critique, a matter of recognizing the desire to return for what it is when it beckons. To borrow a phrase from a mathematician, Ian Stewart, the distinctiveness of this engagement is what continues to give anthropology an “unreal reality” all its own.
Above all, the intellectual legacy of anthropology—itself already impossibly hybrid—needs to be placed in historical rather than nostalgic perspective. For it is this legacy, not unique methodologies or concepts, not closely defended terrain, that makes us anthropologists. History is no more or less symbolically mediated than longing, and like other forms of heritage in today’s world, the legacy of anthropology may have to be marketed as such. But secure in the value of an intellectual inheritance, anthropologists can extend the critiques of the discipline that need to be extended and venture interdisciplinary dialogue without adopting a proprietary stance. To do so requires that we periodize our longings with greater historical specificity. The alternative is to submit to static contrasts between past and present or to modernization narratives about the discipline catching up with an increasingly complex world. Nostalgia has its pleasures and its place, but it goes down better slightly chilled, at a remove from historical accounts.