









Master
Bedroom

Dishes

Attic

Kitchen

Ballroom

Hall Closet

Living-
room

Toys

Legal
pad

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NOTEPAD

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ON INTERACTION WITH OTHERS

When studying other human beings, it is important to balance your own observations with the input of others, to invite many viewpoints. Work should include carefully collected input from the people it is about, which is where long term and immersive field work is vital. It should also include or at least consider input if possible from a variety of scholars/theorists who may have different views - who maybe view the world through the lens of physics, or specialize in feminist theory, or consider economic factors. The relation of people or groups to each other is important, but the relation of people or groups to objects and environments should not be ignored either.



ON THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF OBJECTIVITY

It might be impossible to truly understand culture from “the actor’s point of view” but that does not give anthropologists a free pass to not try their best (Geertz 1973). It might be impossible to know exactly what slight variations of a dish would appeal most to a dinner guest, but it is very possible to know what dish in general they might want, and more importantly, what food restrictions or allergies they might have. When somebody’s life is potentially at stake - such as in the medical field or global politics - understanding a culture from the actor’s point of view can become a moral issue, and trying to know enough to understand how to best take action (or not) is crucial. It’s important to ask, and important to listen.

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SOME NOTES ON THIS PROJECT

I feel that the house (as I know "the house", from a western, middle class perspective) serves for a fitting metaphor/entry point for exploring how I feel cultural anthropologists might practice the discipline without allowing their biases to invalidate the work. A house is personal and known intimately, a part of everyday life, but also a place where one can invite acquaintances who may not otherwise interact to gather, a place with different rooms to accommodate different modes of living/thinking, a place both structured (actions are determined by architecture) and porous (people can move in and move out, windows can be adjusted for the weather, decor and even the structure itself can be remodeled), mundane but ever-changing. As I brainstormed about what points in particular I thought were crucial to confronting the question of bias, I found myself organizing these points into "rooms" of thought, which are found here. This process was inspired in part by Lock & Scheper-Hughes's exploration of anthropology from the entry point of the body (1990).

The choice to use clip-art and stock photos is both a nod to a belief that anthropology must stay current (stock photos were the most accessible contemporary visual media that I could think of) and a nod to the way that anthropology should examine and utilize the everyday as much as the "extraordinary". Clip-art and stock photos are also interesting to consider as products of global capitalism, examples of media homogeneity, and as a kind of symbolic language that straddles the real and virtual.

Technical note: this document runs best on Adobe Acrobat.

trying to ignore history - of colonialism, of racism, of economic inequality, of a discipline - is dangerous

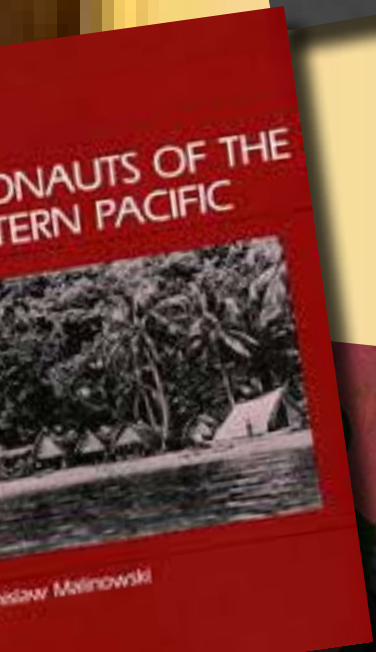


ON INTERACTION WITH HISTORY

Thoughtful surveys and evaluations like the one pursued by Ortner in "Theory in Anthropology Since the Sixties" (1984) are important because (to steal an overused quote from Faulkner):

The past is never dead, in fact it's not even past.

The historical trajectory of the discipline of anthropology is a western one - in the earlier days, a white and male western one - and even the more inclusive developments of the last few decades cannot change that origin and its effects on the establishment as a whole. If most theory is an imperfect attempt at useful mutation of an existing theory, as Ortner seems to suggest in following the development of symbolism into practice theory, to know what theoretical ground you stand on (or stand against) involves knowing the history of these mutations. The same goes for attempting to know a group of people or know their interactions with the world - to not understand the history involved likely means to not understand the complex state of the present day.



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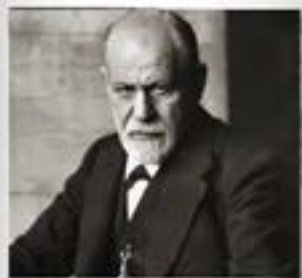
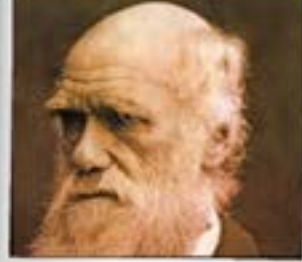
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ON INTERACTION WITH YOURSELF

Bringing personal bias into your thought process is not something you can just decide not to do - not unlike Bourdieu's model of legitimate language reproduction, where human action exists within systems of power (systems which can change eventually due to said human actions but cannot be individually stepped outside of) (1982), one can attempt to change one's biases or use of language but one cannot change that one has biases, or uses language in the first place.

However, the factors involved with our personal biases - our histories, our belief systems, where we live and who we know, our genetic predispositions - are also the factors involved with why we care to study anthropology in the first place - they not only can't be completely removed, but they also, in my opinion, shouldn't be.

One method, and it shouldn't be the only, through which we can study the interactions between people, other people, and the material world is by consciously engaging with ourselves, our own cultures, and our own histories through autoethnography:

"Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience. This approach challenges canonical ways of doing research and representing others and treats research as a political, socially-just and socially-conscious act. A researcher uses tenets of autobiography and ethnography to do and write autoethnography. Thus, as a method, autoethnography is both process and product." (Ellis 2011).

Although not an autoethnography or an ethnography at all, it would be silly to deny that this project was not dictated by me-ness, my biases and interests - an interest in visual culture and a history of playing computer games (and the socioeconomic ability to do so), political views reinforced by like-minded friends and peers, my involvement with a school steeped in western academic traditions, my physical body.

