

THEORY CAN BE MORE THAN
IT USED TO BE

*Learning Anthropology's Method
in a Time of Transition*

EDITED BY DOMINIC BOYER, JAMES D. FAUBION,
AND GEORGE E. MARCUS

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PORTABLE ANALYTICS AND LATERAL THEORY

Dominic Boyer and Gymene Howe

Anthropological knowledge sprawls, incorporating a dazzling variety of thematics, theoretics, and arguments. What varies less is that this knowledge is always in transit. Anthropologists compose documentations and analyses based on their field travels and then set them into communicative motion, hoping that their work will be engaged, absorbed, cited, and rerouted along invisible trajectories. Epistemic transit itself is not distinctive to anthropology. Citationality and circulation are practices of any number of intellectual professions. What differentiates anthropological knowledge is the crucial expectation that it moves along a continuum where one pole is the elite publicity of northern and western social science and the other is the intimate understanding of some other bundle of life experiences. Anthropology transacts in mobile revelation. Its epistemic movements are designed to surprise, confound, and occasionally even delight the paradigms of northern-western social science by leveraging what Lévi-Strauss once aptly termed “the other message,” the knowledge of the not-here that still, fortunately enough, speaks a northern-western language.

Two institutions have helped to cement mobile revelation as a key institution of anthropological knowledge. The first was the general acceptance of Malinowskian field research and field reporting as standards of professional legitimacy in the course of the twentieth century. This standard has proved remarkably durable into the twenty-first century despite the fact that what is understood to be fieldwork has changed significantly (Faubion and Marcus 2009). "The field" can now exist down the block; it can be accessed by a computer interface; it can unfold in surreal montage rather than in neatly bounded realist narrative. In some respects, the epistemic horizons of anthropology have never been wider. Yet what remains crucial is that one reports from an environment that is not entirely one's own, that one mediates or translates between X and Y. Anthropologists individually and anthropology as a disciplinary field consistently delegitimize research that refuses to position itself at an analytical distance from the norms of northern-western social science. For, without distance, however slight and however precarious, there is nowhere to go, no capacity for surprise. Thus, even following the pluralization of anthropological research sites, methods, and objects since the 1970s, we continue to pride ourselves on a capacity for other-messaging, even when "the field" is the office next door and the research subject an intellectual professional very much like oneself.

The second institution is, in a way, the extroversion of the first. When one observes closely what counts as "legitimate anthropological knowledge"—that is, when one reads between the lines of peer reviews and grant-proposal feedback or listens in on departmental meetings, evaluations of job applicants, and the corridor talk of one's colleagues—one realizes quickly that the Malinowskian field report is necessary but never in itself sufficient to guarantee anthropological legitimacy. The field report in its singularity is a case study. It can move, to be sure, but its revelatory power is inactive until it sheds the particularity of the field conditions that gave it form and becomes instead *transparticular*, a study that speaks with other studies, a study that operates as a cryptological key to a larger information set or that repatterns the light and shadow around some broader problem. There are various ways of describing this process of achieving transparticular import, but in the spirit and letter of this volume, we refer to it here as "theory." Anthropological theorization, in our view, is not so much the management of a certain body of concepts as the process of wresting away from an ethnographic case study the cluster of insights that

are worth mobilizing. Anthropologists have long recognized a comparative method as an essential and distinctive feature of their knowledge. Even if that method operates now in a more ad hoc fashion, the movement of insights between ethnographic cases still helps to cohere anthropology as a distinctive field of discourse. Anthropological theory thus thrives on the mobilization of transparticular ethnographic insight. When an article or grant proposal is judged to be "theoretically inadequate," what is usually being said is that this case study is either unwilling or unable to give and receive insights of transparticular import. The offending text is not deemed to be just naïve but also, at some level, a sociopath, refusing to recognize that anthropological knowledge demands not only integrity in its case studies but also a restless desire to bridge heres and elsewhere.

Recognizing (1) that anthropological knowledge is designed to travel and (2) that a process of transparticular theorization is a crucial part of its epistemic mobilization raises the question, both analytical and ethical, as to how theory does and should travel in anthropology. In this chapter, we diagnose and discuss some common tendencies of theoretical travel in anthropology today. We take seriously the models of theoretical motion already available to us in the human sciences (especially Edward Said's "traveling theory" and Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff's "theory from the south") and reflect on growing criticism of how theory (particularly grand theory of the philosophical variety and culture theory of the 1970s and 1980s anthropological variety) operates in contemporary anthropological knowledge. In our own performance of mobile revelation, we argue that the current impatience with theory is closely related to new ecologies of digital information. That is, we show how criticism of theory in anthropology today mirrors a wider contemporary disavowal of the radial (e.g., hub-spokes) model of epistemic organization typical of the mid-twentieth century and its reliance on centralized communication infrastructure. We identify in calls for more theory from below or even for the dissolution of theory the rise of a new "lateral" sensibility signaling the desirability of peer-to-peer meshes and mashes of communication that are better adapted to the epistemic potentialities of emergent digital infrastructures such as the Internet and social/mobile media (see, e.g., Golub 2011; Jackson 2012; Kelly 2012). Along the way, we develop our own model of experimental conceptual practices, portable analytics, in which analytic concepts that emerge from within specific ethnographic contexts are mobilized to help

provoke new insights into the forms and forces at work in other ethnographic contexts. The stakes, we believe, are how to allow anthropological fieldsites and fieldknowledges to interilluminate each other more effectively, generating new revelatory sparks and trajectories in a thickening mesh of digital-lateral connectivity.

We begin with an example of how anthropological research on epistemic mobility can both confirm the Saidian model of "traveling theory" and also open the door to portable analysis.

Traveling Theories and Para-theoretical Mobilities

We know through ordinary experience and intuitively that ideas are modular and concepts have a transmissional life. Acts of transposition across space and time often yield new insights about the analytic process itself and, perhaps more important, provide a novel view on something that seems abundantly familiar. The Greeks used the term *theōra* to designate the man sent by the polis to witness ritual events in other cities. His travels always began and always ended in the same place, his home. For the Greeks, theory was "a product of displacement, comparison and a certain distance" (Clifford 1998, 1), but it was also, interestingly enough, tethered to the familiar epistemic space of home. In Edward Said's influential 1982 essay, "Traveling Theory," we find a parallel reflection on the routes and directions of theoretical passages. Charting an epistemic path through Europe during the first half of the twentieth century, Said's coordinates form a theoretical topography that moves from Georg Lukács's Hungary to Lucien Goldmann's Paris to Raymond Williams's London. He develops a model of knowledge transmission in which theory moves unidirectionally, between senders and targets and from one epistemic location to another. There is no recursiveness to Said's travel tale; routes never fold back on themselves. The modes of transmission are linear, cartographically charted as they move from man to man and author to author, with each authorial actor relatively secure in the knowledge that his works will be read and, for the most part, by whom.

But perhaps the "theory effect," as Pierre Bourdieu once put it (1989, 21), is not always exchanged through the influence of authorship. Often

theories cannot be so neatly tracked by a series of citations and evolving academic discussions. Nor are they summarily unilinear in their paths. They originate somewhere, among some constellation of people, but it is their transposition that allows for analytic insights on social dynamics in places near and far. Traveling theories operate in a particular intellectual universe, largely an academic one, which has its own investments, purposes, and points of departure. What we describe next as portable analytics, in comparison, may be, at least initially, less self-consciously theoretical. Indeed, portable analytics are very often para-theoretical; that is, they may do conceptual work without being explicitly designated, by their originators or by others, as theoretical projects. They are just as likely, for instance, to have very pragmatic, political purposes or artistic and aesthetic end points. However, before elaborating on portable analytics further, let us return, briefly, to Said's model of traveling theory, which is surely one of the most elaborated commentaries on theoretical movement available to us.

In his much-acclaimed essay, Said discerned a recurrent pattern among traveling theories and found that they shared four stages of transmission and emergence. First, he wrote, "there is a point of origin, or what seems like one, a set of initial circumstances in which the idea came to birth or entered discourse." Second, "there is a distance transferred, a passage through the pressure of various contexts as the idea moves from an earlier point to another time and place where it will come into a new prominence." Third, "there is a set of conditions—call them conditions of acceptance or, as an inevitable part of acceptance, resistances—which then confronts the transplanted theory or idea, making possible its introduction or toleration, however alien it might appear to be." And fourth, "the now full (or partly) accommodated (or incorporated) idea is to some extent transformed by its new uses, its new position in a new time and place" (1982, 226–27). As an experiment in ethnographically operationalizing Said's model, we turn to a case study: sexual rights activism in Nicaragua. The theory in motion is "sexual liberalism." Although many other examples could be retrofitting with the diagnostic apparatus of traveling theory, in this instance we are seeking to map not only how theories travel both inside and outside anthropology, and inside and outside particular social settings, but how mobilizing theory in the north, seeing it reconfigured in the south, and then turning it north again can inform a more lateralist turn in our theory

work. Put another way, in the case study we chart here we map the Saidian turns at each juncture with the objective of making a reconstituted theoretical "traveler" capable of portable analysis.

Case 1: Sexual Liberalism in Motion

Beginning with the 1979 Sandinista revolution and continuing through the 1980s, Nicaragua was recognized, for a time, as a beacon of anti-imperial resistance. But after the experiment with social and economic equality, Nicaragua instituted socially conservative policies and more profound neoliberal economic restructuring. In 1992, two years after the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas, Nicaragua instituted the most repressive anti-sodomy law in the Americas. Partly in response to the draconian law, sexual politics—in particular liberal rights claims on behalf of *lesbianas*, *gays*, *homosexuales*, *bisexuales*, *transvestis*, and others—became an increasingly visible element of the Nicaraguan social ecology. Because Nicaragua had a very explicit history with transnational discourses such as Marxism and liberation theology, among others, the emergence and dissemination of sexual liberalism and sexual politics is not in itself particularly novel. Rather, it is another instance in a series of routes and passages where knowledge and ideological models are appropriated, managed, and reframed. But in this process of distillation, we suggest, a set of propositions are formed that can themselves be ported to new epistemic locations provoking distinctions, juxtapositions, and parallels.

(one) "*Coming to Birth/Entering Discourse*" In the global north, the early days of gay and lesbian liberation were founded on principles of both social tolerance and radical transformation. In the 1950s, the homophile movements in the United States and Europe quietly and rather cautiously sought tolerance for homosexuality. This changed dramatically with protests against police repression at the Stonewall bar in New York City in 1969. Gay and lesbian rights proponents began to demand liberation in increasingly public and vocal forms. In so doing, activists employed many of the tools of the second wave of feminism, and more broadly, evoked the political openings and transformations that the civil rights era had begun to achieve. The assertion that individual rights ought to triumph over and against conservative institutions such as the nuclear family and what

Adrienne Rich called "compulsory heterosexuality" (1980, 9) were fundamental aspects of the liberal narrative that animated these politics. Ultimately, claims for equality became codified under the keyword of lesbian and gay pride, a concept that continues to exert its discursive force in contemporary lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender (LGBT) politics. Indexing categories of family and acts of kinship have been an equally generative political repository in the battle for sexual rights. Like Said's reproductive metaphor suggesting that discourse is "birthed," the thematics of kinship have been influential in framing many of the debates around sexual rights, subjectivity, and policy demands, especially most recently in calls for marriage equality.

(two) "*Passage through [to a New] Time, Place, and Prominence*" Nicaragua in the 1980s was a revolutionary place, pursuing a Marxist and nationalist program that was, ideologically, deeply committed to principles of social equality even if these goals were never fully executed. In the mid-1980s, while the country was being besieged by a counterinsurgency war sponsored by the United States, a small group of lesbian and gay identified women and men founded the Nicaraguan Gay Movement. Their meetings involved discussing their lives and the limitations placed on them for their sexual difference. Partly influenced by their interactions with gays and lesbians from North America and Europe who had traveled to Nicaragua in support of the revolution, the group sought to establish new, respectable identity categories to counter the derogatory monikers of *cochón* ("fat") and *cochona* ("dyke"). Beyond claiming a "lesbian" or "homosexual" identity personally, members of the Nicaraguan Gay Movement were also invested in locating a space for sexual rights within the political ideology of the greater Sandinista state project. The relatively quiet sexual politics of the 1980s were replaced with more overt claims for sexual justice when, following the end of the Sandinista state in 1990, the country ushered in a series of neoliberal governments and a set of reforms to the penal code that raised the penalties, and the stakes, for same-sex sexuality. The 1992 anti-sodomy law indicted not only men but women as well; the scope of the law was vast, including even those who were "promoting" or "pagandizing" (and of course practicing) same-sex sexuality. Although the law saw little enforcement, it became a rallying point for diverse activists, from feminists to disenchanting Marxists, and protest against the law

galvanized the contemporary sexual rights *lucha* ("struggle") in Nicaragua (Howe 2013). In Said's terms, liberal rights had achieved, under the sign of sexuality, a new "prominence" through two different sorts of passages: one in an ideological register of rights and the other in the penal potency of law.

(three) "*Acceptance, Resistance, Introduction, and Toleration*" By the 1990s, Nicaraguan sexual rights activists had expanded their demands for equality. The country was being inundated with development projects of various stripes, many of them animated by human rights principles. Perhaps unsurprisingly, activism for sexual equality and tolerance gravitated toward the elusive beacon of modernity and liberal thought that human rights seemed to hold. For some Nicaraguan activists, the terms of gay and lesbian pride (*orgullo lésbico-gay*) offered a promising set of ideals and social principles. Clearly, this move shared more than a little discursive kinship with the political rhetoric that was, and continues to be, important in the United States. In a very public and visible way, this was a period when the concept of sexual equality, identity and rights became the subject of various forms of "acceptance, resistance, introduction, and toleration" across the Nicaraguan political milieu. This toleration was, it is important to note, not manifested in full social equality for sexual minorities. Discrimination remained within families, in the schools, and in many places of employment. Nevertheless, in a discursive and traveling theoretical mode, these logics had settled in.

(four) "*The Accommodated Idea Is Transformed by Its New Uses and Position in a New Time and Place*" As traveling theories of sexual liberalism became resituated in a new time and place, the struggle for sexual rights in Nicaragua became more complex. Some Nicaraguan sexual rights activists adopted discourses of Lesbian and Gay Pride and, in addition, harnessed the moral values associated with human rights. Other activists engaged a formulation that proved to be the most efficacious register for sexual rights advocacy in Nicaragua, which they called "*una sexualidad libre de prejuicios*" ("A Sexuality Free from Prejudice"). Sexuality Free from Prejudice makes an easily assimilable proposition, namely (and according to a document regularly circulated among activists to frame their project) that "there is sexual diversity among human beings" and "this diversity is an

undeniable right." Rather than emphasizing discrimination against sexual minorities or focusing attention on gay and lesbian subjectivity in a definitional form, many sexual rights advocates instead favored a broader approach. In part, this multiculturalist impulse can be read through the lens of liberalism and its progeny. But Sexuality Free from Prejudice equally reflects the Marxist values that fueled the Sandinista revolution. It is predicated on broad social transformation and an attempt to create a tolerant sexual logic for the Nicaraguan nation as a whole rather than simply ensuring the rights of individual marginalized sexual subjects. Sexuality Free from Prejudice takes a step beyond, or adjacent to, Lesbian and Gay Pride by insinuating that some form of sexual pride is part of the general human condition. It is a biopolitical move to establish that everyone not only has "a" sexuality but, more important, a right to it. As it turns out, the composite projects of sexual rights activists, from pride to prejudice, appear to have yielded results. Following a decade and a half of political work and advocacy, the anti-sodomy law was ultimately overturned by the Nicaraguan National Assembly, and new legal codes now prohibit discrimination against sexual minorities. Nicaragua has adopted the trappings of a "new time and place" for sexual rights. Is it free from prejudice? Not quite. Yet it is a place that has seen its share of traveling theories and that has also demonstrated, at the political level, the ability to recast their forms and functions.

The fact that liberal politics and rights have been an important component of civil society activism is a story that could be retold in many sites and idioms. It is, on one level, a diffusionist tale that is not remarkable or unexpected. That political rhetorics and strategies have a global life of their own and are amenable to the quadripartite definition that Said inscribed three decades ago is a testament to the accuracy (and amplitude) of his schema, just as it is a testament to the circulatory powers of neoliberalism and globalization. But it is also clear that the political forms articulated in Nicaragua have their own migratory merit, ways in which their reconstituted logics can be reported to other contexts and perform evaluative work in those settings. The trick is to find points of transparticular correspondence. Since the emergence of the comparative method, from the early twentieth century to the present, anthropologists have often been surrogates for the movement of native theories. But extracting ethnographically particular knowledge and declaring their legibility and legitimacy in other settings

is a complicated proposition. Most anthropologists would refuse to be complicit in simply mapping one set of temporal and locational sensibilities to another place and time without fully elaborating the contingencies of each. These transpositions are never simple, yet we believe it is important to make the effort. In the case of Nicaragua, for example, how might Sexuality Free from Prejudice encourage us to re-imagine queer politics in the global north? How might sexual subjectivity that has emerged through Marxist praxis and refuses explicit identitarian ascription be a useful analytic to reframe the parochial limits of western liberalism and theorizations of sexuality elsewhere?

The story of same-sex marriage offers a case in point. Marriage equality has been a focal battle fueling the politics of sexuality in the United States, constituting one of the front lines in the so-called “culture wars.” Whether same-sex marriage ought to be legal and whether this issue ought to be the primary goal of the contemporary LGBT movement are questions that have, from very different political perspectives, caused a fair amount of discord. Marriage equality has been institutionalized in many parts of the world, including several European countries and South Africa, Argentina, and Brazil, among others. Individual states in the United States have also found variable success in legislating same-sex marriage provisions, with the 2013 Supreme Court ruling on the Defense of Marriage Act opening further possibilities for modifying marriage law. Each of these cases, whether national or state-legislated, has ensured that same-sex couples have a legal right to marry, allowing them to access the legal, fiscal, and moral benefits that follow from this status. As queer theorists and queer political activists have pointed out for some time, however, leveraging the efforts and resources required for marriage equality is a very particular investment, one that may come at the expense of other queer political priorities, such as addressing poverty among queerfolk; preventing homelessness for queer youth; or ameliorating racism, sexism, and capitalist domination more generally. For some, the drive toward marriage equality simply reiterates a “heteronormative” (Rubin 1975; Warner 1991) impulse, a set of values that privileges heterosexual pairings and institutions, and naturalizes their rights and entitlements (Berlant and Warner 1998; Cohen 2005). Ultimately, this may foster the production of a mimetic form of politics, “homonormativity,” in which dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions are upheld and sustained (Duggan 2003, 50). Advocates

of a queered politics of subjectivity and sexuality have questioned the wisdom of devoting so much energy to obtaining the right to participate in a heterosexually inscribed, legally encumbered, and (de facto) monogamous dyadic pairing instead of promoting a more general tolerance for sexual diversity. Why not rally for a sexuality that is not dependent on identity and promote a form of sexual tolerance that is more expansive than that allowed under the aegis of marriage and other reproductive logics? Or taking the formulation of Nicaraguan activists, why not advocate for Sexuality Free from Prejudice?

The grammar of sexual rights in Nicaragua demonstrates how liberal theories of gay liberation and human rights emerged in the north, traveled south, and ultimately found a new articulation, adaptation, and purpose. To take this pivot one turn further—to port the analytic—is to imagine how these theories might effectively recondition the way that sexuality is imagined, theorized, and given political life elsewhere. Mobilizing theoretical labors of the south and pushing them northward is not in itself an entirely new project. Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, among others, have charted a similar passage. Following in the postcolonial intellectual tradition of Homi Bhabha, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Achille Mbembe, and Gayatri Spivak, they have revived a call to theorize from the south. This involves a substantial repositioning of the generative project of theory making to, as Homi Bhabha puts it, its “ex-centric” sites (1994, 177). For the Comaroffs, the African continent is a paradigmatic case where daily life, history, and social genealogies are not securely tethered to the (suspect) veracity of the Enlightenment project. As they see it, modernity has always been a north-south collaboration, even if deeply disparate in its origins and outcomes. Writing against modernist conceits, they ask, what would happen if, instead of treating the quotidian realities of social and political life in the global south as “raw fact,” we instead imagined its possibilities for “theory work” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2011, 6)? Reading the contingencies of the global south against the contemporary crises of Euro-America allows us to recursively reframe the teleological march of capitalist modernity, among other things. With portable analytics, however, we are advocating the further lateralization of these movements to probe the transparticular potentialities of various ethnographic specificities—sometimes moving from the south to the north, or from the east to the west, but just as easily going north, south, and then north again.

As it responds to queer critiques of hetero- and homonormativity (and, at least in the Nicaraguan case, has been efficacious in changing social policy), *Sexuality Free from Prejudice* offers a recombinant form of sexual subjectivity in both political and theoretical registers. Many lesbian and gay rights politics and advocacy practices have sought to guarantee the right to choose a sexual and affective life that is not bound by prejudice. But several global sexual rights movements currently in circulation have also invested in the protection of property rights and securing the financial interests of queer people. *Sexuality Free from Prejudice* offers a challenge to these sorts of autologies and their emphasis on fiscal matters and liberal individualism. Mobilizing the conceptual possibilities offered by *Sexuality Free from Prejudice* allows for a different set of sensibilities, fostering a relationality that is not based on dyadic pairs, financial obligations, and ascriptions to identity. It instead responds to networked logics of human relationships and reckons liberation in ways that go beyond individual subjects and individual couples. At the same time, *Sexuality Free from Prejudice* departs from more radical tenets of queer theorizing and politics because at its core it is a quest for social and legal assimilation. In this way, *Sexuality Free from Prejudice* offers more than a political tactic; it presents a unique analytic position of its own. It is not reasoned solely through lesbian and gay minority politics or grounded in the idioms of identity. But is it not precisely queer either.

The portable analytic that we mobilize in *Sexuality Free from Prejudice* is a peripatetic intellectual resource because it uncovers the paradoxes and tensions of two very different sorts of sexual rights discourses—both queer and liberal identitarian. It signals destabilizations and cracks in each of their naturalizing logics and, in turn, disrupts the concentrated authorities of northern and western liberal epistemologies. It performs an intellectual exercise by translating a Marxian paradigm into the register of human rights that lets us test, query, and experiment with political and intellectual formulas. Appropriations of Marxism and liberal rights in the Nicaraguan case are, in one instance, traveling theory and, in their passage back, “theory from the south.” But in aggregate, this case suggests an analytic that can be transported laterally in a variety of directions. Portable analytics, as we are imagining them, are more flexibly directional than theory from the south and less bound to the world of letters than traveling theory. Rather than an optic from the antipodes or a telephone game

between great minds, portable analytics follow ethnographic life, inviting a lateral meshwork of thought respun to create agile links, not only across space and time but across different kinds of intellectual practice, academic and otherwise, including political tactics, artistic interventions, and other varieties of creative assemblages.

Lateralist Discontent and Portable Analytics

As already noted, something seems awry with theory today. One hears increasing unease among anthropologists about the legacy of the 1980s and 1990s’ turn away from distinctively anthropological theory—a tradition often imagined as culminating in the 1960s and 1970s culture theory of figures such as Clifford Geertz, Marshall Sahlins, and David Schneider—and toward continental (particularly French) theory as the dominant conceptual apparatus of the field. A popular vein of criticism is that the sacrifice of a distinctively anthropological tradition of theory has undermined our disciplinary ability to practice unique forms of concept work within the human sciences. David Graeber provides an excellent example of this position in the context of his announcement of a new open-access online journal, *HAU*, a project that also seeks to reinvigorate anthropological or “ethnographic theory” as a distinctive epistemic practice:

Contemporary anthropology often seems a discipline determined to commit suicide. Where once we drew our theoretical terms—“totem,” “taboo,” “mana,” “podlatch”—from ethnography, causing Continental thinkers from Ludwig Wittgenstein to Sigmund Freud and Jean-Paul Sartre to feel the need to weigh in on the resulting debates, we have now reduced ourselves to the scholastic dissection of terms drawn from Continental philosophy (deterritorialization, governmentality, bare life . . .)—and nobody else cares what we have to say about them. And honestly, why should they—if they can just as easily read Deleuze, Agamben, or Foucault in the original? A project like *HAU* is exactly what’s needed to begin to reverse this bizarre self-strangulation. It is a journal that dares to defy the Great Man theory of intellectual history, to recognize that most ordinary human beings, the world over, have just as much to say about love, time, power, and dilemmas of human existence as any paid philosophers, and that sometimes, their reflections can be decidedly more interesting. It proposes anthropologists

return to the kind of conversations with which we began, except this time, as equals, and that we have a moral responsibility to make the results freely available to everyone, the world over.¹

On the one hand, this is a far from uncontested representation of the current state of affairs in anthropology. Is “disciplinary suicide” not an overdramatization of a field that, regardless of what is happening with its theory, continues to enjoy robust intellectual activity and relevance across the world? But such complaint rather misses the point. Graeber’s discourse, articulated not incidentally by one of the more impressive theorists of his generation (e.g., Graeber 2011), is a rallying cry. It invokes traditional anthropological suspicions regarding the epistemic parochialism of northern-western Great Men. But, most important from our perspective, it also captures the *Zeitgeist* of disenchantment with theory in anthropology. His particular vision may sound somewhat nostalgic for an era ended. But nostalgia is a politics of the future (Boyer 2006), and this *Zeitgeist* has more obviously presentist and futurist expressions as well. For example, another important theorist of his anthropological generation, Bill Maurer, criticizes the search for “(dared) grand theory about something” (2005, 35) and instead emphasizes the need to look more deeply into the “dense lateralizations that obtain between subjects and objects of inquiry” (xv). Maurer defines this space of “transacting . . . parallel knowledges” as the focus of properly anthropological experimentation. Here, too, theory is problematic if it interrupts ethnographic adjacency and singularity, if it performs a “monopoly in the market for truth” (16) rather than a status of one kind of mobile “lateralization” (17) among many. Paul Rabinow has advocated a move from theory to the analytic temporality of “adjacency,” by which he means “neither the overdrive of the universal intellectual nor the authoritative precision of the specific. Rather: the space of problems. Of questions. Of being behind and ahead. Belated or anticipatory. Out of synch. Too fast or too slow. Reluctant. Audacious. Annoying” (2007, 39). Remarkings on the incapacity of Sahlinian culture theory to handle novel happenings in the world, Rabinow writes that “it is only that so much effort has been devoted in the name of social science to explaining away the emergence of new forms as the result of something else that we lack adequate means to conceptualize the forms/events as the curious and potent singularities that they are” (1999, 182). Indeed, Rabinow’s position seems to be the inverse

of Graeber’s. For Rabinow, the worst thing anthropology can do is to continue to pretend as though anthropological culture theory constituted a universalist achievement and monopoly on truth; this would be damnation through eternal repetition.

So what, if anything, unites this field of discontent? We argue that these three examples share a dissatisfaction with a practice of theory in which a limited set of theoretical categories (whether drawn from culture theory or French poststructuralism) are used to define and bind the possible forms of anthropological knowledge. *Theory* is defined in each case as a monopolizing epistemic authority, whether in the form of the universal authority of European philosophy or in the name of the professional authority of anthropological tradition. One finds here the rejection of what we would term a radial organization of theory, a model in which a surplus of epistemic authority emanates from a limited number of broadcast points, generating largely hub-spokes, unidirectional flows of messaging. Such flows might have their uses. For example, their conceptual and citational economies of scale could offer communicative coherence to a field of knowledge. But the critics hold that what we are terming radial theory ultimately undermines the anthropological enterprise. Why? Because radial theory is believed to restrict epistemic innovation and distinctiveness (especially in the margins of northern-western sociality in which anthropologists often conduct their business) while reinforcing at the same time the norms and forms of northern-western epistemic authority. Radial theory, in other words, can explain everything, but it is always the same answer. Thus, however “grand” it may purport to be, it seems an increasingly tedious and suspect exercise. The discontent expressed articulates a desire for theory that is better attuned to the knowledges emerging from the work of ethnography, for theory that, to use Maurer’s phrase, “lateralizes” more effectively. We argue that this is an increasingly doxic feeling today in anthropology. But why, and why now?

Put plainly, this is critique for the digital era. Today’s theoretical criticism in the human sciences is not the same as Said’s, for whom, as we have noted, the directionality and organization of messaging remained relatively unproblematic. Said was most interested in highlighting the contingencies of meaning and the processes of reappropriation as theory moved along its radial corridors. But for the anthropologists we have just discussed, the underlying problem is the organization of messaging itself.

In our view, the institutionalization of Internet-based communication has prompted new practices and aspirations for anthropological knowledge-making, new epistemic dispositions, if you will (see Kely et al. 2008). It is thus not incidental that Graeber's intervention appears in the context of an open-access, online journal, a project that is precisely seeking to multiply lateral lines of research communication beyond a radialist credentialing cartel of "journals of record," most of whose content is captured by the paywalls of corporate publishing. What seems nostalgic about Graeber's vision for *H4U* could be viewed instead as a kind of steampunk appropriation of older anthropological theory in the name of arriving at the same kind of experimental ethos that Maurer and Rabinow call for.

Because, to the best of our knowledge, no one has yet directly connected the rising dissatisfaction with the state of theory in anthropology to the rising awareness of the possibilities and realities of anthropological knowledge-making in the Internet era, we reiterate: a lateralist revolution in anthropological knowledge is arriving, building on the multidirectional, peer-to-peer capacities of the Internet, social media, and mobile media. There was a broadcast era of academic knowledge that is currently being undermined from within and without by a new media ecology, just as other broadcast institutions (e.g., newspapers, television, and radio) find themselves today in a state of crisis and reimagination. As a conservative intellectual profession like many others, anthropology has been relatively late in recognizing its own process of transformation. Yet the messages coming from anthropologists deeply engaged in digital culture have been unequivocal that the practice and organization of knowledge is being reshaped, in some ways profoundly, by the saturation of all aspects of northern professional intellectual life with digital communication and information technology (Boellstorff 2008; Boyer 2013; Coleman and Golub 2008; Kely 2009; Miller 2011). Anthropologists are now screenworkers as much as fieldworkers, relying on digital data archives, on computers, on word-processing software, and search functions; and using e-mail, social media, and mobile telephonic data devices continuously. Anthropological research unfolds in a fast-time informatic continuum in which the lines between fields, offices, and homes are increasingly blurred. At the level of mundane practice, the impact of the digital revolution on the techniques of anthropological research and communication has been enormous. Yet the changes have transpired so quickly that it has been difficult to come to

terms with their broader implications for the epistemic practice of anthropology. The open-access issue—the question of how to share all published anthropological knowledge—is an excellent case in point; we have been slow to disrupt an inherited conservative radiality that seems drastically at odds with the oft-stated desire for anthropological knowledge to travel more widely and impactfully in the world.

If one accepts that the unease regarding theory in anthropology today expresses a lateralist chafing against the legacies of radial institutions of knowledge-making, then the next question is to ask, what might lateral theory look like? We do not feel that an answer to this question has yet crystallized, although experiments in lateral theorizing appear to be multiplying rapidly (e.g., Choy et al. 2009; Fischer 2007; Helmsreich 2009; Ingold 2011; Fortun, this volume). Although we do not pretend to be able to imagine lateral theory as a singularity (that would be a radialist exercise in itself), in the remainder of this chapter we further unpack the experimental modality of lateral theory that we term portable analytics. As previously noted, the goal of portable analytics is to help elicit the desired mesh of lateral analytical flows with the effect of helping to disperse the surplus authority of any particular theoretical tradition and language. The basic procedure of portable analysis is to locate analytical concepts within ethnographic contexts that help us to objectify or epitomize the forces and forms at work there, and then to dislocate and mobilize these concepts for experimental use elsewhere. We think that nurturing such mobility and linkages has the potential not only to generate new and distinctively anthropological concept work but to offer unusually provocative insights, especially when the common polarities of epistemic travel are reversed (just as the Comaroffs and Graeber advocate).

What follows is a second case of portable analysis in action.

Case 2: *Stiob* as Portable Analytic

In another collaborative research project with Alexei Yurchak, Dominic Boyer has been exploring the juxtaposition of late socialist aesthetics of parody with contemporary U.S. popular and political culture (Boyer and Yurchak 2010). The relevant portable concept here is *stiob*, which is a Russian slang term for a particular late-Soviet technique of parodic overidentification, the method of which was to inhabit the form of authoritative

discourse so perfectly that it was impossible to tell whether the imitative performance was ironic or sincere. *Stiob* was particularly germane to late Soviet socialism because of the communist party-state's obsessional emphasis on the formal orthodoxy of its discourse. As Boyer has discussed elsewhere (2003) with respect to censorship in East Germany, late socialist states typically invested considerable energy into the formalization of languages of political communication as a means of constituting perfected socialist consciousness. Yet the main achievement of late-socialist authoritative discourse was most often the expert overcrafting of every aspect of language. Reading front-page articles in *Pravda* or *Neues Deutschland* or any other central party newspaper in the 1970s, one encountered an exceedingly technical, cumbersome, and not seldom absurd language filled with long sentences, proliferating nominal structures, perplexing passive constructions, and repetitive phraseological formulations. If one listened to speeches of local communist youth leaders, one heard texts that sounded uncannily like quotations from previous texts written by their predecessors (which is, in fact, precisely how they were produced). The pressure was always to adhere to the precise norms and forms of already existing authoritative discourse, and to minimize subjective interpretation or voice. Yurchak (2006) terms the result of this pressure "hypernormalization," a snowball effect of the layering of the normalized structures of authoritative discourse on themselves. Political discourse largely ceased to have an indicative relationship to external reality and became increasingly absorbed with its own performance.

Under such conditions, an aesthetics of *stiob* made sense. Faced with authoritative discourse that already caricatured its alleged purpose, *stiob* did not engage it on the level of literal meanings (because socialist discourse often had little indicative relationship to the world around it). Instead, the *stiob* parodic technique of overidentification mirrored the discursive overformalization of the socialist state. There was also a tactical advantage in that, although the state easily identified and isolated any overt form of oppositional discourse as a threat, recognizing and disciplining the critical potential of overidentification was more difficult because of its formal resemblance to the state language. Also, unlike more overt forms of dissidence and critique, overidentification with state rhetoric did not require one to wholly distance oneself from communist idealism. For this reason, *stiob* rarely occupied or promoted recognizable political positions—it operated outside the familiar

axes of political tension between party and opposition, between socialism and liberalism, aware of these axes but uninvested in them.

The hypernormalization of discourse in the late socialist party-state can thus be interpreted as enabling the performativity of *stiob*. Boyer and Yurchak then mobilize their analysis of late-socialist *stiob* to explore its capacity to expose the norms of forms in late liberal political discourse as well. Using *stiob* as a kind of conceptual compass, they work through a variety of recent instances of overidentifying parody in western popular and political culture (e.g., "fake" news television shows such as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, the activist hoax group The Yes Men, the parody newspaper *The Onion*, and so on), which they term experimentally, "American *stiob*" (Boyer and Yurchak 2010). They conclude that the lateral mobilization of *stiob* helps to reveal how the changing institutional and mediational organization of political culture in the United States (and elsewhere) has consolidated discursive conditions analogous in certain respects to late socialist hypernormalization. For example, Boyer and Yurchak highlight that the increasing monopolization of broadcast media production and circulation and the adaptation of news journalism to digital media have actually made political and economic news content significantly more homogeneous and experientially repetitive. They examine how the general professionalization of political life and the rising importance of 24/7 news cycles for political communication have made political performance in the United States increasingly calculated and formalized, invested more in repetitive messaging than in riskier forms of political debate and communicational improvisation. Finally, they look at how in the 1970s and 1980s the increasing delegitimation of both socialism and social democracy led (neo)liberal political discourse into ever tightening loops of monological self-reference. Liberalism has increasingly meant the freedom to express a limited set of convictions as witnessed, for example, in the 2012 U.S. presidential election when two fundamentally economically neoliberal and politically conservative parties struggled to perform difference elsewhere in their platforms.

The authors do not claim, however, that late-socialist *stiob* and "American *stiob*" are exactly analogous, just as the political forces generating hypernormalization in the two cases differ considerably. Much as Said noted, theory should and does transform through travel. Moreover, portable analysis does not seek to transmit exact conceptual replicas from point to point, as in radial theory. Like other lateralist experiments in anthropology, the

purpose of porting analytics is to stage collaboration between fieldites and fieldknowledges, to reveal differences as well as samenesses, through precise but partial illumination. For example, in the case of *stiob*, its mobilization from late Soviet Russia to the late liberal United States allows us to develop analytic homologies between the ethnographic case studies that we might not otherwise see without a conceptual spark jumping ahead to guide our way. When *stiob* is embedded in the ethnography of contemporary U.S. political culture, it contains enough diodic glow to illuminate how discursive hypernormalization is rising in late liberalism, producing the very kinds of repetitive messaging and standardized modes of political performance and communication on which *stiob*-esque metapolitical parodists such as Colbert and The Yes Men thrive.

Portable analysis is exploratory and experimental in this way; and, as noted, it should be mobilized in multiple directions for best results. For example, porting *stiob* to another elsewhere we find that there is also “Icelandic *stiob*,” a further mutation in the form of what was perhaps the world’s most successful “joke party,” Besit Flokkurinn (the Best Party), whose self-described “anarcho-surrealist” leader, Jón Gnarr, was elected mayor of Reykjavík in 2010. In the aftermath of a terrifying collapse of the Icelandic banking system, currency, and economy in 2008, Gnarr described the Best Party as an effort to provoke a “cultural revolution” in Iceland. All the major political parties in Iceland had, in one form or another, supported the political establishment that had engineered the collapse. A conservative government had deregulated the banks and allowed them to take on massive debt. The succeeding government then tried to hold the Icelandic people accountable for the debts amassed by the bankers. As in late socialism, it seemed as though Icelandic liberal democracy had ceased, in any way, to be accountable to its citizens or to offer any alternative to creditor-friendly neoliberal policy. This situation, Gnarr explained, is what provoked him and his colleagues to action: “Political discourse is all dead and vapid. I’ve never been interested in governance or politics. . . . I’ve listened to all the empty political discourse, but it’s never touched me at all or moved me, until the economic collapse. Then I just felt I’d had enough of those people. . . . I started reading the local news websites and watching the news and political talk shows—and it filled me with so much frustration. . . . So I wanted to do something, to fuck the system. To change it around and impact it in some way” (Magnússon 2010).

A *stiob* sensibility in Gnarr’s and his collaborators’ language is quite clear—the assertion of the emptiness of political discourse, the disinterest of the Best Party in traditional political labels and ideologies, the recourse to overidentifying parody (or, in Gnarr’s terms, “fun”) as a more efficacious mode of disrupting an ossified political system than conventional oppositional politics. These emphases carried over into what news media often glossed as a “mock” political platform. The Best Party’s ten-point platform was composed of thirteen points and included statements such as “3. Stop corruption: We promise to stop corruption. We’ll accomplish this by participating in it openly” and “10. Free access to swimming pools for everyone and free towels: This is something that everyone should fall for, and it’s the election promise we’re most proud of.” Gnarr repeatedly promised a polar bear for the Reykjavík zoo. The Best Party platform was popularized through an Internet campaign video to the tune of Tina Turner’s *Simply the Best* that circulated widely in Iceland. In the video, collaboratively produced with several prominent Icelandic musicians, the Best Party either satirizes the traditional form of the political campaign video or presents a sincere political message. At the climax of the video, Gnarr is seen shouting from the top of a building in Reykjavík that represented the worst spending excesses of the precrash period, demanding a “Drug Free Parliament by 2020.”

Over time, in a variety of other speaking engagements, it became evident that several elements of the Best Party platform obliquely referenced significant social, political, and environmental issues facing Iceland and the world. The polar bear for the zoo addressed, for example, climate change and the current Icelandic policy to shoot polar bears that swam to Iceland to avoid melting ice farther north. The free towels at swimming pools was aimed at developing European tourism, invoking an obscure EU regulation that, for a pool to be classified as a “spa,” free towels had to be provided. The drug-free parliament referenced an extended rhetorical analogy that Gnarr later elaborated that the relationship of Icelandic political culture to the nation was one of a substance-abusing father to his injured yet enabling family. But Gnarr consistently refused to state, either before or after winning the election, that the Best Party held any political ideology in the conventional sense. In his first presentation of a city budget in December 2010, Gnarr commented, “What kind of party is The Best Party? I don’t really know. We are not a proper political party. We are maybe more of a self-help organization, like Alcoholics Anonymous. We try to take one day at a time, to not overreach

our boundaries and to maintain joy, humility and positive thinking Our motto is: humanity, culture and peace. We do not foster any other ideals or political visions. We do not share a predetermined, mutual ideology. We are neither left nor right. We are both. We don't even think it matters."

Today the Best Party no longer exists. But there are still observers in Iceland and beyond who debate whether the Best Party was a serious political intervention or some form of protest performance art. Gnarr himself continues to refuse the idea that any clear distinction can be drawn between parody and sincerity in the political practice of the Best Party. The analytic of *stíob* helps us to pinpoint the tactical character of this ambivalence as a means of highlighting (and perhaps remediating) the monopolization of political discourse. Gnarrian *stíob* seems at once a genuine effort to inhabit the norms and forms of liberal representational politics yet also a performative denial of the adequacy of those forms for guaranteeing democratic rights and freedoms. In the Best Party's turn toward a ludic model of political action, we perhaps even see, as in the Nicaraguan case, a new epistemic mutation of liberalism.

So, to close, the experiment of using *stíob* as a portable analytic allows for the "interillumination" (Bakhtin 1981) of the conditions and effects of overformalized political discourse in late-socialist and late-liberal societies. It enables anthropologists to explore how and why authoritative discourse in contemporary U.S. and Icelandic political cultures has come to enable a *stíob*-like performativity of its own, a project that Boyer and Yurchak hope will allow for more extensive study of the phenomenon of form in contemporary northern political cultures. This opening was created by the lateral mobilization of categories and concepts originating outside North America and Western Europe as a means of providing fresh insight into their political cultures. In a simple sense, the United States and Iceland have not, or not yet, originated their own native terms for *stíob*. Yet when the Russian concept is ported into these contexts, homologies become visible that then permit deeper mapping, exploration, and comparison.

Conclusion: Lateral Theory and Radial Remains

We have sought in this chapter to both diagnose and advocate emergent theoretical trends in anthropology. On the diagnostic front, we have discussed why the epistemic work of theory remains crucial for anthropology,

yet explored reasons why theory of a certain kind seems increasingly problematic today. On the advocacy front, we have argued that because a transformation of theory is already underway in anthropology—with the critique of universalist (radialist) theory being an important part of the transformation—what is needed now is more self-awareness and experimentation in the development of new lateralist modalities of theory.

We hope that it is by now obvious why we do not want to close our discussion of portable analysis—our own modest contribution to the broader field of lateralist experiments already underway in anthropology—with a universalist model of lateral theory. Our objective here has not been to define a new concept "lateral theory" so much as to suggest a language through which to discuss a phenomenon already in the making. In an important respect, lateralization means rebalancing the relationship between concept and method in our analytical work. It is not that concepts are no longer important in anthropological analysis; rather, their provisional and processual character is highlighted, meaning that the method of doing generative concept work becomes more important than the integrity of any concept or paradigm per se. The long-term goal is not to innovate new universal categories or to perfect paradigms. Rather, the point is to further develop and refine anthropological theorization today as the effort to work between transparticular and particular knowledges, developing techniques of frame formation and frame dissolution, as an art in itself. Anthropologists today are beginning to adapt their epistemic enterprise of transparticular connectivity to the potentialities of our new media ecology. This ecology offers unprecedented capabilities of informational archiving and searchability, textual plasticity and intertextual linkage, and fast-time physical and informational mobility. Theory in the radial mode incorporated the fixity of print language and the signal strength and purity of broadcasting. Theory in the lateral mode is growing into the informational elasticity, speed, and noise of the digital era. One could, of course, lament this state of affairs. But one could also work to extend and improve what seems to us to be a very creative process of transformation that has the potential to expand the reach and impact of anthropological knowledge massively.

To focus once more on our examples of portable analytics, we have already shown their potential to interlink the epistemic work of artists, political actors, and anthropologists. There is no reason to stop there.

The procedure could just as easily be used to make connections between the epistemic work of religion and of science or between any number of other ways of knowing. Like other experiments in lateralization, portable analysis prioritizes flexible, multidirectional, and plural connectivities that can help accelerate epistemic exchange and partnership between anthropologists and their interlocutors, both in the field and elsewhere in the humanities, social sciences, and sciences. As per Graeber's call, it can make everyday knowledge theoretical, but it can also spark new synapses between different cultures of expertise by mobilizing concepts in unexpected directions and at unusual velocities. Lateralization thus has the capacity to broaden and deepen flows of knowledge between anthropologists and their research subjects, to support new designs of knowledge-making.

Our final point is cautionary: even though the content of anthropological theory is rapidly incorporating lateralist sentiments, we should not be too quick to congratulate ourselves. The potential of greater lateral connectivity guarantees little on its own without the development of new institutions to support it. At the moment, the broader implications of lateral theory continue to be muted by the enduring strength of radialist (and preradialist) institutions such as, for example, disciplinary standards of solo proprietary authorship and a model of research communication that remains reliant on a limited number of privileged, paywalled journals. We believe that, for lateral theory to actually become something other than a lateralist aesthetics of radial theory, it needs to become an ethical as well as a conceptual intervention. This is not just a question of confronting the ethics of theory as much as what Faubion (2009) has called the broader "ethics of connectivity" in anthropology today. Portable analysis and lateral theory would be optimized in an intellectual environment oriented by open-access institutions (meaning that all anthropological research communication should be freely and publicly available) and supportive of multiresearcher collaboration and multiauthor experimentation. True to its digital environs, lateral theory wants to share analytic code, to mash and to mesh, to use techniques such as portable analysis to actually make fieldsites and field-knowledges co-present and interactive in ways that will transform and enrich anthropological epistemic practice. In short, we need to make more of the dense lateralizations that are becoming possible both inside and outside our theoretical work.

2

ON PROGRAMMATICS

James D. Faubion

In concluding *An Anthropology of Ethics* (Faubion 2011), I identified four general conceptual apparatuses—referential, model-theoretic, tendential, and diagnostic—that singly or in combination have become part of our anthropological legacy. I made the effort for several reasons. The first was apologetic (read "self-justificatory"). *An Anthropology of Ethics* is a generalist enterprise. It is the sort of enterprise that was common and comprehensible enough in social and cultural anthropology through the 1970s. It is a rare enterprise, perhaps bordering on the exotic, and very often regarded with considerable skepticism today, especially among cultural anthropologists and especially (though not exclusively) in the United States. The prevailing rationale for such skepticism can be traced to Clifford Geertz's critique of the quest for cultural universals, first published in 1966 (in the same year, ironically, as his entirely generalist essay on religion as a cultural system; both essays appear in Geertz 1973). It takes on further force with the nominalist epistemology of Paul Rabinow's *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco* (1977) and the similarly nominalist epistemology of Johannes