

## Patterns of Culture: Arizona Anthropology

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The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them; and the desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose. - *Isaiah 35:1*

Anthropology is the social science's most diverse discipline. Over the last 30 years, some have been troubled by what they perceive as fragmentation and believe the field is spinning away from a common core of objectives, methods, evidence and ideas that allow it to be coherent. This is a legitimate concern if immediate intelligibility is important and anthropology is put in the context of disciplines such as agronomy or economics with more standard measurements and objectives. Yet, if we do not dismiss such concerns so quickly, how, in light of such diversity can anthropology maintain research coherence and a meaningful intellectual community? Anthropology at the University of Arizona has provided an answer to this question. I think that when we look back at Arizona's tradition and reflect on our personal experience as students, teachers and researchers there, the variety in the discipline that

is troubling to some is exactly what made this an exciting place to be, a supportive community for growth and representative of an organizing principle that promotes coherence and intelligibility and variety at once. I would like to offer this short essay on this subject in gratitude for what the eclecticism of anthropology at Arizona did for my intellectual and personal life.

Before attending the University of Arizona for my Ph.D., I was a graduate student at Yale and Berkeley. Those were impressive institutions with excellent anthropology departments, but I came to experience something unique at Arizona. At Yale and Berkeley, I saw inflatable dinosaurs, large freezers labeled "monkey body parts", mattresses shoved in corners, matrices on whiteboards, stimulants, and giant sandboxes and other weird objects in anthropology buildings. Despite previous experiences with anthropolo-

gy's eccentricities, what I saw on my first day at Arizona surprised me. In a large room slathered with reddish mud and dust on the bottom floor of Haury, several large potting wheels organized the space around which things and people were scattered and in dialogue about any number of subjects. There are experimental spaces in many archeological and biological laboratories, but this felt different. "Experimental" is a term that at its core has a single meaning, but in its practice is often expressed in completely opposite ways. The key to most experimental procedures is to limit or isolate variables, a condition requiring a great deal of control. They must be ordered places. The less common use of experiment is not in the sphere of science, but that of the arts. Experimental art or performance is about exploring what is not known in a way that is not often measured or controlled. Could we imagine two less comfortable crowds than physicists at an experimental theatrical play or thespians at a series of experiments measuring protons?

These two divergences in our curiosity and creative desires were described by Nietzsche, through the Greek example, as the opposing but complimentary "Apollonian" and "Dionysian" characteristics. Order, reason,

boundaries, and measurement were qualities associated with Apollo, while disorder, emotion, and spontaneity were attributed to Dionysius. Rarely do two forces combine into a method of knowing and experiencing the world that is productive and healthy. The Schiffer Lab was "experimental" in both meanings of the word. Why so? Although I was never a member of the lab nor was Michael Schiffer an advisor of mine, the material evidence in the room and stories from students attested to the creative power of this environment. This clearly was a space in which ordered thought designed experiments and then was used to reflect upon the results. If you spoke with a student working with clay, you learned of the concepts, history and issues in materiality and thought that were placed upon that very experiment. The remnants of a history of such moments could be found throughout the room. On the wall farthest from the door hung posters that categorized the decorative motifs of ceramics, in which the subtlest of distinctions had produced a typology that would have eluded almost anyone. These were the taxonomic sketches of a former faculty member. Like figures in a stain-glass window of a church, these stood as a reminder of an ideal of intellectual and cre-

ative insight for its current members. These were two examples of the Apollonian drive to be found in the lab.

Clay, hands and centrifugal force can be a hot wet Dionysian mess. But learning and growing can also be messy and the best of research takes place when there is no real idea about what might happen. The Dionysian is about more than just a lack of control, it is about the blending of categories. The most obvious categorical difference transcended was that between the mind and the body. Most attempts to answer abstract questions involve abstractions—especially in the social sciences. It was natural, that in a lab focusing on how behaviors, thoughts and materials interacted, that the methods would combine thought, bodily actions and material. This may seem an obvious process, but anthropologists have long been interested in pastoralism as well as bodily experience. Yet, how many of them have spent their research time petting sheep under the fading light of dusk? I believe that such an escape from the modality of abstraction is not only empirically essential to such questions, but it also is a catalyst for other types of thinking and experiencing that keeps thoughts fresh, innovative and creative. The bridging of the body and

mind to understand the world was also carried into transforming materials. These artifacts stimulated more than minds, but also eyes and hands which were then used to understand the answers that they held. And the minds, hands and eyes were not solely those of the original researcher or potter, but other students and faculty members were drawn into these projects. Students talked, thought and discussed these objects and ideas that were present in the lab, as well as the research that took place outside of it. The breaking down of interpersonal subjectivities was paralleled by the blending of disciplines within anthropology. Many of the people working within the lab were not working on materiality or even archaeology. Those I got to know would regularly bring up something they learned from others in the lab and its activities when discussing how they formulated their own later research, or even something far more quotidian. Not much could be as moving as the fictional fusion of spirit, mind, body and inter-subjectivity through the creative act that was idealized by Patrick Swayze and Demi Moore in the pottery scene from *Ghost* (1990). However, I find it fitting—in a Hegalian sense—that, in my experience, the clay, ideas and people of the

Arizona ceramics lab seem to come both materially and spiritually closest.

As a cultural anthropologist, I would like now to turn to the subject of how the experimental spirit has defined this branch of anthropology at Arizona. Since Malinowski, the standard technique for research in cultural anthropology has been participant observation. It was as breathtakingly novel to past anthropologists as it seems now obvious to us that living with people, talking to them and experiencing the patterns of their daily lives could help us understand their culture. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this method has resulted in the studies of people and knowledge that has been significant in the context of anthropology, the academy and in humanity's attempt to know itself and the world. Yet, there may be information and processes in the world that may not be visible in the words or actions that are phenomenally legible to anthropologists using participant observation. If so, what methods could be used? And, far more importantly, what invisible and silent processes should we be examining? The University of Arizona's Anthropology Department has played a significant role in answering these questions over several decades.

Although I did not have the

opportunity to know Robert Netting, his groundbreaking study of a Swiss Alpine community was my first experience of an Arizona-styled attempt to expand cultural anthropology. The ability to understand change and continuity was limited by ethnography that was tied to the experience of a single, or group, of ethnographers. Questions involving long-scale processes, beyond the professional career of an individual, were left to archaeologists and ethnologists. One of the significant questions for the human sciences and critical issues for humanity is whether communities can maintain sustainable populations that do not degrade the environment, without harsh Malthusian checks like warfare and famine. This was a hard question to answer, and Netting's work now seems even more prescient in our contemporary social and environmental context. Netting transcended the limit of participant observation by borrowing techniques from the French *Annales School* which examined demographic changes using birth, marriage and death records. Focusing on the village of Törbel, Netting combined this archival information from the Catholic Church with his own studies of farming and herding activities in the village, and a knowledge of agrarian ecology gained from

years of ethnographic work in Africa. In *Balancing on an Alp* (1981), Netting was able to show that not only had this relatively isolated community maintained a sustainable relationship with the environment and stable population size, but also the mechanisms to keep this balance. Seemingly banal rules of marriage and property kept this community within the carrying capacity limits of their environment, not war, disease or famine. Such a new method had answered a question dating back to at least the 18th Century and brought to light a process shaping communities and the environment around us, but remaining hidden. Although using such large data sets may seem natural and manageable to us today, when Netting conducted this research, such computational methods were just being developed and put in the hands of anthropologists. Some years ago, I helped Rhonda Gillett-Netting move her office. Several boxes were full of punch cards Robert Netting had used to run the necessary statistical operations. In the 1970s, such a method was neither obvious nor at the click of a button.

Working with Steve Lansing was my most direct experience of the spirit of experimentation at Arizona. Although he is most recognized for his research on Balinese

religious and agrarian dynamics, I will focus on his earlier work. His eclectic approach to anthropology and his creativity has long benefited the academy and the public, and inspired students. One of his early contributions to the fields of anthropology, ecology, and education was his creation of ethnographic films which include *The Three Worlds of Bali* (1979), *Chiefs and Kings of Indonesia* (1983), *The Goddess and the Computer* (1988) and *The Way of Science* (1996)—all of which were broadcast nationally. These films have brought distant cultures and people to the public and students for decades, but they also provided the world examples of authentic anthropological methods—a project not easily done in the shadow of Meade. Lansing's influence in ethnographic films extends far into our media and culture. Under his direction, one of his students at the University of Southern California filmed "ride alongs" with the Los Angeles Police Department. This documentary was the origin of the reality television show *C.O.P.S.* (1989-Present), making Steve Lansing one of the grandfathers of reality TV. To those of us who know him, it is like listening to Rachmaninoff, while simultaneously keeping in your mind that the composer also created the recipe for pop-tarts. Beyond his

work in ethnographic film, watching Lansing's ability to combine and create questions and methods defied any limitations of thought I had seen prior to Arizona. On one day, he would give a seminar in his Introduction to Theory course on the relationship between over-all jeans and the Second Frankfurt School, and the next day, give a lecture in his Environmental Anthropology course about robots pushing wooden blocks and fractal theories.

The quotidian experiences we had with Netting and Lansing may normalize the characteristics of their research. However, the approaches of Robert Netting and Steve Lansing were doubly apostatic for anthropology in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They integrated anthropology into other disciplines without subsuming the social sciences into the natural sciences. This was not a result of ideological commitments, but because the evidence they found pointed not to a one-to-one materialism but to an interaction between different fields with different laws governing them. This was unusual for anthropology because it did not follow the reductionism of sociobiology, nor did it embrace the research mainstay in cultural anthropology. Most schools of cultural anthropology have continued to meth-

odologically turn farther toward Malinowski's original technique. Such "ethnographic involution" has produced highly reflexive ethnographies. Such works have not appealed to many in the academy or the public. In contrast, instead of more intensely performing the same activity, the trend at Arizona has been to expand into existing social and natural sciences, as well as previously unknown methods. As I have described in the prior examples, this expansion outward has not only covered a great deal of ground, but the novel findings that come with novel methods have brought forth questions that might never have been asked at all.

This "Arizona method", in which anthropology is integrated, but not reduced to other disciplines is the result of from several factors. It is partially the result of the creativity of the individual anthropologists in the department. We must also recognize that being around members of other subfields, both faculty and students, helps us think beyond the obvious ways of asking and answering questions. But, such proximity of difference does not always produce creativity. It only works when people are driven by curiosity alongside others who are also passionate about their own work. This normally means

that they delight in sharing what they have learned. The forces that attract people to their own questions then become the means that connect people and ideas rather than fragment them. Durkheim famously posited that societies were held together because people in them were either alike, thus emotionally capable of relating to one another, or different, thus functionally required to need one another. The former he referred to as "mechanical," and the latter, "organic". Following Durkheim's categories, the solidarity at Arizona is unique because it is both mechanic and organic. In some cases we needed one another to learn and grow, yet we also sincerely identified with and took joy in the differences of other people and their projects.

The experience of unity underlying diversity was significantly present among my peers at Arizona and unique for my educational career. At a lunch table, there were fellow students who earlier in the day would have: analyzed several thousands of pieces of pottery fragments; combed through remains of South American mammals; created multidimensional representations of archaeological

remains found 50 years earlier; written code to understand the shape of labor networks of agriculturalists; or figured out how to get a ferret to run on a treadmill. We took so much delight in such divergent projects and experiences. Felicitously, the power and positivity of eclecticism has been expressed at the University of Arizona once before. Filmed on campus, *Revenge of the Nerds* (1984) parallels several of the patterns I have discussed. It chronicled a collection of gifted yet awkward undergraduate students trying to become part of the collegiate community. Initially failing to fit in, they decide that rather than trying to become like everyone else, they would become more of themselves. Such an existential turn results in embracing new methods for addressing traditional problems, promotes self-discovery and builds a community that is coherent yet encourages creative expression. It appears that the diversity of approaches, interests and ideas has become the foundation for both a community of nerds and anthropologists at the University of Arizona. This we appreciate...and celebrate.