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An Anthropology of Experience, Now

Sometimes we are unfair to friends, teachers, mentors, and interlocutors. What follows is an example of such unfairness in which, motivated by their insights, I try to think alongside Rich and Sally Price in an attempt develop novel perspectives on a contemporary political conjuncture that seems to speak to, but nonetheless require, further elaboration of the interpretive work both ethnographers have performed in helping to map what scholars now refer to as a Black Atlantic. In short, our 2025 United States is marked by a broader, often popular and decidedly anti-democratic, politics that may mimic both artfully and perversely an anthropology in which truth, content, evidence, the human, and the political have come into question in ways that depart radically from 19th and 20th-century hermeneutics and the humanisms that supported such interpretive habits. And that is why I offer these pages to and about two anthropologists who have done so much to expand how we think about genre and writing in new ways, to broaden who and what counts as historians and histories, and to accept the muddiness and blurred provenances of certain truths too often taken as readily apparent or easily theorizeable by those who might reduce the world to a series of models.

As historically-minded ethnographers dedicated to their interlocutors and to the truths of their experiences, and thus to what we come agonistically to believe to have happened, Rich and Sally help me trace a productive path through anthropology's transformation from a discipline split between the materialisms of an Eric Wolf—or even a Marvin Harris—and the burgeoning interpretivism of a Clifford Geertz, to a post-*Writing Culture* period of postcolonial critique, experimental writing, fascination with the implications of the work of Michel Foucault, and on into a shift toward the affective turns, new materialisms, aesthetic critiques, and a questioning of nature/culture so important to my current graduate students. They do so because, over the course of undoing facile claims to Eurocentric, unmediated knowledge of ostensible Others, Rich and Sally have challenged how we read, write, and think by exploring the situatedness of evidence and claims even as they refuse to cast out the possibility of the concrete, the real, and the (relatively) true. To do so I will simply react to Rich's avowed antipathy to wearing his theory on his sleeve and read a bit of the Prices' work, and especially Rich's at-times criticized historical verificationist tendencies, in light of ethnography. I believe Sally and Rich would say of much of what follows below, "Yeah, we know that." But the important thing is that some ethnographers do not. Or else they've forgotten.

In December 2023 I sat with a group of men slagging my Congresswoman. We were in Hillbilly Hall, a storied redneck bar sometimes celebrated as one of New Jersey's last dirt floor drinking establishments to put in a floor, and located just six miles, but a world away, from Princeton University. Fed up and a few drinks into the evening, I seized my glass, stood, and bellowed with Latinate vowels, "A toast to Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Touch your glasses together for AOC." Jaws dropped. Conversations ceased. As I sat down, a man in

camo passed by and queried my tablemate, “Bullhead” [After the catfish], “What’s up with your boy, Bull?!”

“OH, that’s John. Don’t mind him. He’s a libtard college professor from New York, but he whacks deers.”

“Hoo yeah,” replied his interlocutor, before walking off.

In recent years, while working with mostly male, white, Christian, and conservative deer hunters, I’ve faced a somewhat special fieldwork situation. On one hand, when in camo or headed to my treestand, I am relatively indistinguishable from my interlocutors. I am sympathetic to their struggles with rural gentrification and dispossession. Yet I share little in relation to party-based politics with those with whom I hunt. I represent much of what they agitate against. But we get along, in large because I have learned to whack deers and I am willing to spend a January night on my hands and knees, blood-trailing a wounded deer.

Central to our divergences is a politics of knowledge, and expertise. People who don’t know that NAFTA was signed by Bill Clinton in 1993—not by the evil Barack Obama in his second administration—are certain that my classes are nothing more than advertisements for cross dressing, Antifa, Black Lives Matter, and Chinese and globalist dominance. They may be at least partially correct. But brilliant men who read the woods and the winds know more plant and animal science than the state biologists who regulate them, and tune a bow effortlessly and intuit a buck’s path as they creep soundlessly from tree to tree searching for sign, flail in the important details of their interpretations of political economic realities. Central to this flailing is a lack of basic knowledge and a rejection of interpretation as a contested or iterative process. By this, I mean that some quite intelligent and sometimes even ethically admirable citizens with whom I interact regularly and respect in important ways nonetheless lack critical reading skills, an ability to recognize and debate divergent philosophical positions and, most of all, a knowledge of global and US history. Yet they act as if they do and they tend to replace the moments of analysis on which they rely in hunting with a “gut knowledge” that too often enlists specific kinds of urban and nonwhite people as scapegoats. Perhaps this is unsurprising. But it predisposes my friends and interlocutors to consume in a patriotic register manifestly untrue media accounts of DOGE successes, USAID graft, Tren de Aragua invaders, and the suggestion that tuning into the correct media source or the pronouncements of a loudmouthed, orange oracle will open up an unadulterated truth that requires no critical parsing.

Central to the hunters’ worldviews are a lack of facts about areas I deem important, a surfeit of facts about topics most of my academic colleagues know little about and at times denigrate, and the claim that feelings, rather than a carefully contextualized evaluation of evidence, reveal what is real. And the putting forth of facts that challenge those worldviews is too often understood as nothing more than a politicized dance of opinions intended to subjugate them. Of course, I am not arguing that there are not occasions when the hunters’ subject positions and knowledge bases yield important insights. Or that knowledge fails to take form in the gut, or in predispositions and affective stances. And we ethnographers know that conspiracy theories

and disqualified knowledges are often sources of soon-to-be verified fact. In fact, anthropology has been critical to the acceptance of such claims. Perhaps this is one reason that I experience a malaise, an uncanny recognition, as I listen to the hunters take up and deploy in contradictory and authoritarian fashion strands of class analysis, critiques of science and bureaucracy, and a deep suspicion of state bureaucracies. These are staples of my trade at a moment when my generation of anthropologists often favors analysis that focuses on performative and pragmatic effects, genealogies of power, and the ways that affects and objects that no one can quite touch are nonetheless gathered to support the investigator's political leanings. However, I am more and more convinced that ethnographers increasingly forsake a broad-based, experiential knowledge of how their interlocutors sleep, fish, love, and demand recognition not as part of social movements or an explicitly political conjuncture under investigation, but as friends, enemies, and agemates. Please don't misinterpret this too-thin gloss of "Anthropology now" as some call for a simplistic, down and dirty, heroic field work or a rejection of some thing called discourse that I seek to condemn by separating it analytically from practices and a material world.

Sally and Rich have long excelled at the excavation, emplacement in dialogue, and critical production of facts from unexpected meeting grounds. Thus it is worth exploring the nature of their expertise, what supports it, and what it does and might do in the wake of an anthropology that has moved away from practices that encourage what might be described as an aversion to referential truth, understood as some sort of real. Central to this project is a historicization. One place to begin is *The Convict and the Colonel*.

Convict does so much. From the photo of a woman painting Médard Aribot's house on an easel alongside a postcard of the same landscape at the outset of a section that focuses on representation, memory, and authenticity, to its division into three narratives linked by the uncovering of evidence and a concern with resistant actors, *Convic*t is simultaneously bold and sly, formally innovative and choked with content. It moves between social history, biography, and the circulation of art objects and images across different evaluative contexts while tracing the fugitivity of Martinican workers and rebels. It reveals how things, events, and people pass into and out of different registers tied to knowing the past. First published in early 1998 (and quickly published in Sally's French translation to make it available to the fishermen who figure in the story), it does so well so much of what I set out to do when I began dissertation fieldwork in July of 1997. In other words, it is meaningful in part because it is of my era, taking and pushing in new directions debates and methods I considered, and still consider, important.

Nonetheless, I recall one dissonant moment in my initial reading. I recall being surprised by the denunciation of the *creolistes* and their lack of historical accuracy, as recounted in introducing the "postcarding of the past." I thought, "Hey, it's fiction and it's a way of remembering, part of a discursive production of the past from a present that demands certain historical figures and associated authenticating evidence." Rich, however, worries about the accuracy of this discourse, the celebration of the plantation, and the misrepresentations of maroons and their true history. While I sympathize, I was educated not during the classical, mid-

century period of US anthropology nor the discipline's post-1964 opening into interpretive, symbolic, and historical ethnography. I was educated when power/knowledge were king.

This is one reason I began this paper with Hillbilly Hall. Rich worries about authenticity, seeking to defend authentic maroon history and Medard from a postcarding that passes as authentic history. Rich's expertise is on display. But what do we do with expertise, understood as a set of claims based on techniques for considering carefully and producing facts and the operations that gird them?

My violation of social norms in Hillbilly Hall was based on a certain expertise—one similar to Rich's pointing out to cultural heritage professionals in Martinique that many of the rural practices they sought to confine to the past or to Haiti are still practiced in their part of France. Please recall that my camo-clad antagonist offered a "Hoo-yah" when he learned that I whack deers. Here camo—my camo—like Rich's loincloth worn in the field, index a certain expertise. But today my university colleagues chuckle at the idea that I wear camo. It is vaguely embarrassing, not simply because of who wears camo, but because it indexes a mode of participation that goes beyond asking hunters about their reasons for killing animals or supporting Donald Trump. Engaging in certain activities now understood as far afield from an engaged ethnography, rather than representing and reading those representations as detached from their referents, is configured as a problem. During graduate school, begun in 1993, my classmates and I would chuckle at Skip Rappaport's shirtless appearance in *Pigs for the Ancestors*. Kind of like a pith helmet, we learned to read such photos as claims to a power tied to the colonial, to an ethnographic authenticity sought by the anthropologist as a hero who shouldn't really be wearing that skin. But Rich WAS fishing, and accompanying Saamaka tree fellers and fishermen in Martinique. And I am hunting, butchering, and killing in New Jersey. The consequences of those actions inform my representations, and my very being, in ways that I cannot predict and that often diverge from our verbal interactions even as they support my right to engage in such interaction.

Like camouflage, which bedazzles and confuses in order to muddy the borders of bodies, a participation in, rather than fetishization of, Malinowski's "imponderabilia of everyday life" is too often overshadowed today by the important critique of how such imponderabilia authenticate the outsider and re-enact systems of colonial domination. This is important in terms of Rich's concern with verification, ostensibly correct facts, and what we might call their moral universe.

Today I rank among the top 1% of New Jersey hunters in terms of deer taken each season. Thus I am not an authentic hunter simply because I have produced it for you—or been produced by you—discursively. Rather, there exist a series of experiential referents in the world and extra-discursive actions or techniques that produce them, that produce me as a subject in and of dialogue. Those referents are called deer bodies and the techniques that accompany them. Dead deer—at least those punctured with lead or arrows—do not exist without a human intervention that is somehow different from their construction in discourse. Primarily because one does not need to know how to "knock an arrow" or where anatomically to begin to

disembowel a large mammal when one speaks about deer. Nor does one need to stifle a sob when beginning to transform a living being into meat in order to speak of hunting. Might we then have an authenticity 1 and 2, kind of like Rolph Trouillot's historicity 1 and 2? Just like we may face a referentiality 1 and 2?

One surprising afternoon, aloft in a hickory tree at sunset in a New Jersey park, I experienced a slightly disoriented Leah Price, professor of English, and her husband Nir Eyal, whose academic work focuses on bioethics, walking past my perch, seemingly lost, far from the hiking path. My memories of that event recall my reading above of her father's *Convict*, in part because that historical ethnographer and my account of meeting Leah rely on at least three narratives. One is my own rendering of the experience. The second is Rich's, who wrote me an email that included in turn a snippet of Leah's representation. And the third is from anthropologist Webb Keane, a friend of Leah and Nir, who once regaled me with yet another version of my "rescue" of his friends.

An amused Keane offered this story following his presentation about ethics and near-humans. In that talk, he suggested that robots, animals, and AI all take on quasi-religious qualities or associations—as does a crumbling Azande granary and its witches—due to their doubleness, or their simultaneous inscrutability and proximity to humans and human action. In doing so, he highlighted the linguists' distinction between co-texts, or those strings of words put together algorithmically on the basis of the probability that one term or expression follows or precedes another, and contexts. Here context refers not to words that come to sit alongside other words, but to a referentiality beyond the text. This is not a simple claim, or relationship. But there's something to it. A counting of cans of imported foodstuffs in the Sunbeam store in Martinique, a fishing expedition on a river in Suriname, or a search for drops of blood on autumn leaves while pursuing a wounded deer, for example. And for Keane, such quotidian relations are what produce ethics and morality by providing an infrastructure for moving beyond the particular and into a third-person, generalizing narrative. Morality and ethics, then, are not simply the "I," but the "we" and the "they." Moving out inductively from the Saamaka, then, and understanding how "they" place themselves in history is thus a profoundly moral narrative.

From my current vantage point inflected by salutary postcolonial critiques of power and orientalizing gazes, it is easy to discount stereotypically manly and emblematically ethnographic activities as an anthropological heroism intended to authenticate the author's representations. And, indeed they do. But they do so in multiple ways. And a certain authorship, or even authenticity, based on a move from co-texts to contexts, threatens to break habits and create new lexical and grammatical associations. This is an old, old claim within anthropology but I am making it in the wake of postcolonial critique, and the relative abandonment of the referent in recent social science, whether one speaks of an object-oriented ontology or the versions of deconstruction that have done so much as they moved out of literary theory into the Anglophone academy. This authenticity 2 is thus much more than an imperial locus of domination, even as it is often just that when it takes the form of authenticity 1. Yet as my comments above on

knowledge as a function of misunderstood or absent referents in U.S. political discourse suggest, a certain expertise in referentiality and thus verification is absolutely necessary.

It should be clear that I've been riffing off David Scott's 1991 critique as well as Rich's 2001 response in "The Miracle of Creolization." In recalling this debate I seek a viewpoint, or even a hermeneutic, from an anthropology in which referentiality mattered in particular ways, typically related to the recognition of interpretation reliant on actors and contexts. I find this important because we are currently in a moment when, whether one is an electrician in rural New Jersey who kills deer, a watcher of Fox News' broadcasts of Democrats' ostensible polling malfeasance in Detroit, or an anthropology graduate student whose unscrutinizable invocation of affect supports claims about the real makings of the world, referentiality and verification often take a back seat.

Why are guns important in the US today? And why are they a moral issue? On one hand, they help people commit unspeakable atrocities. But, following Keane's point about moral infrastructures through which a third-person, enveloping ethics develops, they are also tied to ideas of freedom, masculinity, frontiers, and resistance to oversight in ways that they are not in most of the world. We know that, perversely, guns are for many US citizens part of a very real if apparently erroneous infrastructure of freedom. Any decent ethnography of such freedom must chart the nodes through which it becomes possible to think. Those nodes do not become apparent when asking about guns, or when tracing the discourse of freedom and guns. They become apparent when one carries a gun, or lives intimately with people who do, observing and joining in as those persons demonstrate what is important in spheres of life that apparently have little to do with guns and killing.

Details about Saamaka life are not ethnographic nuggets, imponderabilia. Getting the history right—and even verifying it through recourse to European newspapers, among other sources—is not simply about colonial categories and forms of knowledge. Rich and Sally, your insistence on searching for what is correct, in holding out the possibility of getting it right (whether the details of eighteenth-century history in Suriname or the life history of African statues in Paris's Quai Branly museum), has become recognizable to me as part of a moral narrative in which a series of unmarked relations come to establish the possibility of expansion, of inclusion, of a moral perspective on us rather than the details of me. It is a story about who counts as human, as a subject, and as cosmopolitan that is founded on fact. But here as fact it is a map to a moral infrastructure. This is not a single story born of a single infrastructure. And that is why we must struggle to get it right, but living, authentically, outside the boundaries of research as defined as such or pointed toward a problem. But might getting it right involve recognizing the construction of an explicitly moral narrative in which claims to better knowledge are much more than the situated knowledges described by Donna Haraway?

Detritus, flotstam, chaff, and events. Events that become detritus and chaff that passes to the status of event. Getting these right, as affordances in a moral architecture seems to me to be what Rich and Sally have done, with special relevance to the field of African American Studies.

Getting them right is and is not a way of telling us what really happened, or of positing an outside to discourse. Rather, it's about understanding material nodes that somehow enjoin us to take a certain path, whether it's a path in which Saamaka play a pivotal role in global freedom, or guns guarantee the liberties inscribed on a piece of paper.

And this short paper, and especially its initial musings about asking too much of leaders in our field, seeks to emphasize that it is impossible to make the right choice without correct claims about what composes that path, making it traversible. Your fish, your loincloth, your truths about menstrual huts, objects' provenance, and their circulation and reproduction provide important clues to how you've done that and how we might all do something similar, albeit at a very different moment. But might we learn even more from you today, at a difficult juncture that is not quite "post-truth"? In short, how do two thinkers who have blurred boundaries and expanded the universe of facts and their evidentiary supports explain how it is they become arbiters of fact?