



# Introduction

## Cultural Analysis as Cultural Critique

**T**hirty years after the publication of Marcus and Fischer's *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* (1986), American anthropologists have done little to realize that project. Principal evidence of that failure is the near-total lack of an anthropological voice in forums for public intellectual debate in the United States. That deficiency is less of a problem in Europe, where social-cultural anthropologists have a cachet denied their American colleagues. It is also true that innovative print and on-line resources in which the anthropologist engages the modern world are both more successful and more substantive in Europe than in the United States.<sup>1</sup>

Despite these encouraging developments there remains, I think, a need following on Marcus and Fischer's decades-old call for a sustained cultural critique of American society. To conduct an exploratory move toward that end is my goal in this collection of essays. While trying to take into account international work in the discipline of anthropology, I am resolute in my attempt to examine prominent features of American life from the perspective of an American anthropologist—a native writing about the natives, if you will.

I write in what I perceive is a time of crisis for American anthropology, that “queen of the sciences” that has pretty much abdicated its responsibility in the crucial matter of explaining ourselves to ourselves. My sense is that someone needs to carry the torch, however weak and flickering, into public discussions, discussions that today are of increasingly grave importance. While it is far too ambitious to suppose that an anthropological voice will be heard amid the din of 24/7 cable news and its army of talking heads or in the increasingly beleaguered world of thoughtful print journalism, it is still worth making the effort to chip away at our discipline's willful irrelevance. Not to sound too old and grumpy, academic anthropology in the United States is in frightful shape. For the most part we are still, in the well-worn phrase, the

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eccentric in pursuit of the exotic. If anything, I'm afraid quite a few anthropologists have gone in the opposite direction, accepting politically correct accounts of neoliberalism, globalization, climate change, gender, race, etc., which they should examine critically.

Compounding that problem is a distressing tendency in much anthropological writing to raise the academic drawbridge, embedding topics that just might have real-world importance in a matrix of bloodless and essentially incomprehensible terms. A little time spent looking over the titles of leading anthropology journal articles and symposia produces the following specimens:

- “theorizing the contemporary”
- “socialities of indignation”
- “individualized tourist mobilities”
- “temporalities of displacement”
- “the injury of precarity”
- “articulating potentiality”
- “the critical imaginary”
- “the architecture of collective intimacy”

What could these phrases possibly mean, and why should they matter a whit to anyone outside the tiny community of social-cultural anthropologists? Note the obscurantist techniques employed here. Perfectly good adjectives in the English language, such as “contemporary” and “imaginary,” are rendered as nouns, leaving the reader to puzzle over: the contemporary ... what?, the imaginary ... what? And everywhere there is an apparently irresistible urge to add the abstract suffix “-ity” to ordinary words, blurring their meaning and introducing a stilted, antiseptic tone to the prose: “sociality,” “alterity,” “temporality,” “precarity.” It is a practice befitting Castiglione. Just as we badly need to broaden our appeal to the thinking public (admittedly a shrinking constituency), we retreat to a “safe space”—the going trope for intellectual cowardice—where, rather than cookies and milk, a tasteless gruel of gibberish is served up. Cultural anthropologists used to be explorers of the diverse social worlds out there; they have now become refugees in their own societies. Whatever happened?

This collection of four essays represents my attempt to refashion cultural analysis (or, as I have come to prefer, anthropological semiotics) into a hard-edged critical tool for the study of American society and culture. Be advised: there are no “safe spaces” in what follows. In the four essays I develop a fairly radical form of cultural critique that owes a great deal to the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche. The analyses offered here proceed from an aphorism in *Twilight of the Idols* ([1889] 1954: 473):

Could it be that wisdom appears on earth as a raven, inspired by a little whiff of carrion?

In their role as ethnographers, cultural anthropologists often emphasize the importance of empathy with their subjects; they strive to see things “from the native’s point of view” (Geertz 1983: 55) and somehow to translate that vision into discourse accessible to a Western audience. Here I suggest we adopt a different, harsher stance: the anthropologist needs to steel himself or herself to function as a *pathologist of the social*, to follow that “little whiff of carrion” as it leads into the bowels of human existence. In his laboratory the medical pathologist dissects the diseased or broken bodies brought to him; in the social milieu of the field (whether in faraway places or, as in the present essays, right here at home) the cultural pathologist delves into the beliefs and institutions of societies experiencing major crises. Stark as this vision is, I think it is true to the original mission of cultural anthropology, which was charged (by its imperialist masters) with conducting up-close, on-the-ground studies of the fragmented, sick, and dying societies left in the wake of Western expansion. We have had a lot of experience of living with and studying pathology; tragic as it may seem, it is our heritage and should not be denied.

## The Essay Topics

The four essays focus on the Jonestown, Guyana, massacre-suicides, the Lance Armstrong sports-doping scandal, the *Aliens* movies as they bear on the abortion issue, and the 9/11 terrorist attacks. What do these four subjects possibly have in common? My answer in brief: they are all high-profile, “big ticket” events or cultural productions that have engaged the American public at large. If cultural anthropology is to have any chance of acquiring that public voice whose absence I lamented above, I think it is essential to apply whatever analytic skills we may possess to matters of real importance and interest to the people around us. It should be noted that my perspective here cuts against the grain of traditional anthropology, in which the common, the sensational, the popular are regarded as somehow inauthentic, unworthy of scholarly attention, the province of journalists and the swollen mob of media pundits. While the latter yearn to be flies on the wall of a room where big decisions are being made, big events planned, the anthropologist as ethnographer spends his or her time in rooms where nothing much ever happens. No wonder, then, that his or her reports inspire so little excitement in the general public.

Even though the traditional haunts of anthropologists—the Amazon, New Guinea, the South Seas—have given way to fieldwork sites in national societies, these still tend to be “exotic” in the sense of being apart from our

daily lives. For example, here are a few titles of articles from the May 2016 issue of *American Ethnologist*:

“Belonging in Ethno-erotic Economies: Adultery, Alterity, and Ritual in Post-colonial Kenya”

“SIM Cards of Desire: Sexual Versatility and the Male Homoerotic Economy in Urban Congo”

“Everyday Recomposition: Precarity and Socialization in Thailand’s Migrant Workforce”

“Fixed Abodes: Urban Emplacement, Bureaucratic Requirements, and the Politics of Belonging among West African Migrants in Paris”

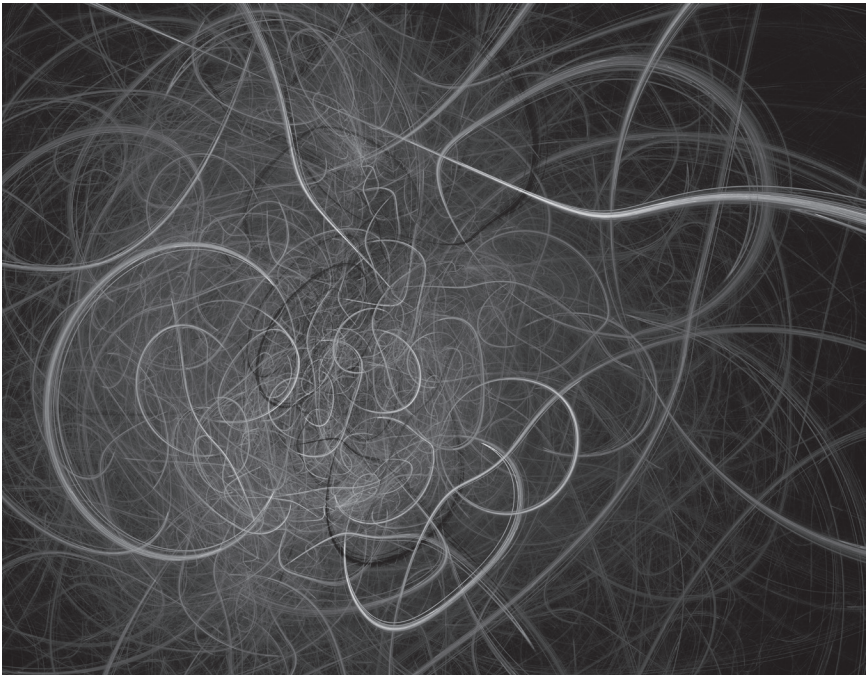
“Sharia, Charity, and *minjian* Autonomy in Muslim China: Gift Giving in a Plural World”

Our friends “alterity” and “precarity” make their reliable appearance here, along with a new entry, “recomposition,” or specifically, “everyday recomposition.” Again, a cloud of dust bunnies begins to form in one’s brain—at least in mine. Isn’t “composition” pretty much a one-off affair? If you “compose” a letter, a poem, a song and then change it, aren’t you revising or editing and not “recomposing” it? That would seem to be a very special kind of change, not “everyday” at all. Also, if the subject is a living being, wouldn’t it experience rejuvenation rather than “recomposition”? Please note that these remarks are not criticisms of the individual articles. I have not read them; they may well be erudite, perceptive pieces. It is rather that I approach them in something of the way that a sailor casts out a sounding line in shoal waters: here is shallow water, avoid it; there is deeper water, steer toward it. Search out the deep water—a useful guide, I think, for doing cultural analysis.

It is true that much current anthropology focuses on matters closer to home than adulterers in Kenya, West African migrants in Paris, or Muslims in China. In the United States ethnographers study a wide range of subjects: inner-city ethnic neighborhoods, migrant camps, retirement communities, hospitals, cults, motorcycle gangs, and hedge fund companies, to name but a few. My point here, however, is that all these research topics are sufficiently small scale and “other” to qualify as legitimate subjects for anthropological treatment. They are decidedly *not* the headline stories or blockbuster movies I have staked out as my subject matter. The essays collected here pursue that contrary path. I contend it is precisely those cultural productions, events, beliefs, practices that attract or hold sway over tens of millions of Americans that are the key to understanding what American society is all about. I develop this argument at length in my book, *American Dreamtime: A Cultural Analysis of Popular Movies, and Their Implications for a Science of Humanity* (Drummond 1996), which contains detailed analyses of several blockbuster movies.

## Analytical Approach

Quite apart from their subjects, the four essays depart from traditional anthropological practice in another important respect. That departure consists in an inquiry into the nature of an *event*. Most of us are comfortable with the usual definition of “event”: it is an occurrence; something that happens at a particular place and time, perhaps something notable that causes us to single it out from the daily flow of our experience. It is discrete, bounded, not only in space and time but in our thought. You can draw a mental line around it. So when someone mentions Jonestown, 9/11, the *Aliens* movies, Lance Armstrong’s appearance on the *Oprah* show, our response is rooted in that deeply held assumption that these are all well-defined “events.” These essays explore the idea that the event is far more complex. When something happens, it generates an intricate web or network of associations and interpretations that radiate out indefinitely. The here and now come to affect the there and then; a single experience makes itself felt in other contexts and, of utmost importance here, acquires a set of often discrepant meanings. It may be helpful to liken this idea—in a purely analogical way to be sure; I do not want to be accused of physics envy—to the concept of *quantum*



**Figure 0.2.** Quantum entanglement. © Natali art collections/Shutterstock.com.

*entanglement* in theoretical physics. Once two particles have interacted, they continue to influence each other *and the entire series of particles* with which they interact in the future. Here's a nice representation of the quantum entanglement of particles, events, and, yes, society-culture. *This* is the critter with which cultural analysis must deal.

I suggest that a cultural event, like a quantum event, is unbounded in this sense. Its meaning is somehow—and here the physicists seem none too sure of how it works—transmitted, reflected, refracted, contradicted as it reverberates through the human and physical worlds.

Failure to incorporate—or even consider—the possibility that the event is such a complex thing is responsible for the alarming fact that most public intellectual debate of important topics (and even not-so-public discussions among anthropologists) exhibits a curious form of ethnocentrism. By this I mean that the usual reaction to an important event is to place it within an existing structure of belief, rather than use it as a means for interrogating or—remember the cultural pathologist!—dissecting that structure. The assumption is that we already know what happened; now we just have to explain it. The whole point here, however, is to use the essay topic—Lance Armstrong, 9/11, etc.—as a *lens* or probe with which to view and dissect the social-cultural context of the event. I want to upend the usual process of interpretation—certainly that of the media-pundit variety—in which one begins with the assumption that the subject of discussion is well defined and blithely proceeds to flesh out its meaning in a particular social context. It is rather that the meaning—or set of discrepant meanings—of the social context itself (i.e., “society”) emerges only through a close inspection/dissection of the event. If my proposal seems more suggestive than substantive, the following synopses of the four essays may firm it up.

### “Jonestown: An Ethnographic Essay”

Until the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the mass suicides-massacre at Jonestown, Guyana, in 1978 represented the largest number of civilian deaths in modern American history. Over nine hundred people died. The atrocity triggered an avalanche of newspaper and magazine articles, television news stories and specials, and a number of books. A minor contribution to that burgeoning corpus was a letter to the *New York Times*, “No End of Messiahs,” by the renowned anthropologist and public intellectual Marvin Harris (1978). The piece is a glaring example of that ethnocentrism I spoke of, anthropology's version of original sin, and here committed by one of its luminaries. For Harris, and for virtually all writers on the subject, Jonestown was an *American* tragedy. Jim Jones and his Peoples Temple followers were Americans who established their community in Indiana before relocating to California and

from there to Guyana. For its chroniclers, including Harris, the fact that the Peoples Temple was located in Guyana was little more than an exotic backdrop for a phenomenon that whetted the American appetite: cults. Harris's piece was a harangue against cults and, he argued, the deplorable American educational system that facilitated their formation. He even managed to implicate the editorial board of the American Anthropological Association in all this. This is the very opposite of true ethnography, an arrogant travesty that insists on framing everything, even something as bizarre as Jonestown, in terms familiar to an American audience. My essay adopts the contrary perspective: that the jungle tragedy be treated, again, as a lens through which to view the social and historical context of Jonestown. I am singularly qualified to pursue that tack, having spent over two years in Guyana, most of that time in Amerindian villages within a hundred miles of the Peoples Temple community. Like that image of quantum entanglement, the *event* of Jonestown is complex, incorporating matters as diverse as American politics and race relations, corruption within the Guyanese government, Guyanese land development programs, Caribbean reggae, Georgetown (Guyana) street gossip, and even an eerily similar millenarian cult that flourished among Amerindians of the Guyanese interior some 135 years before Jonestown. The essay thus argues that ethnography—anthropology's stock in trade—consists in identifying a host of discrepant meanings and puzzling out their possible interconnections. And, most important, in that quest the ethnographer does not have any sort of authoritative voice; his puzzling over things is of a piece with that of the "natives." We are all conflicted, just struggling to find our way.

***“News Flash! Cultural Anthropology Solves Abortion Issue! Story at Eleven! (Being a Cultural Analysis of Sigourney Weaver’s Aliens Quartet)”***

Abortion is perhaps the most divisive issue within contemporary American society, with all indications being that both its rhetoric and its violence will intensify over the coming years. This essay proposes that the conflict is not amenable to any conventional solution: the forces of light or darkness will neither triumph nor agree to compromise. Rather than American society figuring out what to do about the abortion issue, in all likelihood the intractable nature of the problem will prove a key element in transforming fundamental cultural values and ideas concerning human reproduction, medical science, and the emerging phenomenon of biotechnology. Given the critical nature of the problem, it is disappointing that partisans and media commentators have done little more than bundle up the platitudes of “freedom to choose” and “right to life” in more or less strident rhetoric. The most radical and far-reaching treatment of human reproduction in a future world of biotechnology has come from a perhaps unexpected source: Sigourney Weaver’s

*Aliens* quartet. The essay conducts a cultural analysis of those movies and, in the process, identifies a solution to the abortion issue. Story at eleven!

### ***“Lance Armstrong: The Reality Show”***

When Armstrong appeared on *Oprah* in January 2013 and confessed to years of taking “performance-enhancing drugs” there was widespread dismay, condemnation, a sense of betrayal among the public. A favorite son had violated a sacred taboo: the athlete is supposed to be a superb example of the possibility of physical perfection. He or she is *natural*. As with Jonestown, the corporate media seized on the occasion, printing or airing exposé after exposé of the racer’s career, tracking down trainers and physicians who might have been involved, detailing the physical dangers of taking those drugs (and thus providing moral guidance to kids just getting interested in endurance sports). But what was behind that reaction? A thorough cultural analysis—again, a pathologist’s dissection—treats the Armstrong event as, yet again, a lens through which to examine its underlying beliefs. Of utmost interest here is the belief that there exist two fundamental categories of being: the natural and the social (here including technology). That belief is the foundation of a *folk taxonomy* that operates in American (and generically Western) society. Please note that this claim should not be confused with Lévi-Strauss’s magisterial argument that the Nature/Culture opposition is at the wellspring of human thought. Mine is not nearly so grand an argument. Here I am simply suggesting that ordinary Americans (and, again, generic Westerners) going about their daily lives see their world as neatly divided between what is natural or physical and what is artificial or technological. When someone or something appears to cross that boundary marker, it constitutes a violation of a sacrosanct taboo (not unlike the incest taboo), which then triggers a powerful, society-wide emotional response. All hell breaks loose. For us, the athlete is clearly in the domain of the physical. Armstrong’s self-serving behavior broke the rules; he contaminated his superbly conditioned physical body with the dangerous products of the pharmaceutical industry. For that, he must be chastened and must pay dearly. Incidentally, a drama of just this sort, but without a readily identifiable miscreant, is being played out in the furor over introducing genetically modified organisms (GMOs) into our food supply.

The Lance Armstrong scandal involves a second major foundation of American/Western culture: the ethic of *competing to win*. My title describes the scandal as a “reality show” because Armstrong’s actions exemplify the sort of behavior that has become endemic in popular culture with the ascendancy of television reality shows. Their popularity attests to the fact that their theme of competing to win resonates mightily with audiences; Americans/Westerners consider it entirely natural—that word again—for people to compete over



everything in life and, most important, to compete *to win*. The essay traces some implications of that ethic throughout American history and into the present day. As I write (July 2016), a certain individual is attempting to parlay our obsession with winning into a seat in the Oval Office. As not a few have suggested, our presidential politics may be the ultimate reality show.

In a suitably anthropological manner, the essay points out that competing to win is not a universal human drive; it is, rather, a feature of our particular pathology that the cultural analyst dissects. I develop that idea through a close comparison between an episode of the most famous reality show, *Survivor*, and the former practice of log racing among Gê-speaking tribes of central and northeastern Brazil.

### ***“Shit Happens: An Immoralist’s Take on 9/11 in Terms of Self-Organized Criticality”***

I have referred to the arrogant ethnocentrism of Marvin Harris (1978). However, this pales in comparison with that of George Jr. immediately following the 9/11 attacks. When Bush surfaced that evening, he assumed a sad puppy-dog expression and declared, “Today the world has changed.” The world, not the United States. The media firestorm following the actual firestorm of the twin towers gave the impression that was indeed the case. Virtually all accounts of the 9/11 attacks agreed on just what had happened; the nonstop television images of the planes slamming into the buildings were burned onto the retinas of viewers. It was The Event, its nature indisputable. The dichotomies tumbled out and were paraded as God’s truth: Good vs. Evil; Freedom vs. Tyranny; Rationality vs. Fanaticism. But consider my remarks here regarding the nature of an *event*. Staggering catastrophe that it was, the 9/11 attacks were not a discrete phenomenon, an occurrence well-defined in time and place whose what-ness was indisputable and whose why-ness needed only to be determined by the dozens of pundits drawn to it like bees to honey. No, as with Jonestown and the Lance Armstrong scandal, the meaning of 9/11 *as event* is unbounded, multivocal, emergent, filled with discordant, contradictory messages.

Approaching 9/11 from that perspective, the cultural analyst again assumes the role of pathologist of the social, picking through a host of discrepant meanings to determine how they may be connected. Here she adopts the persona of Nietzsche’s “immoralist” as that figure informs Nietzsche’s philosophy, from *Daybreak* ([1881] 1997) all the way through *The Will to Power* ([1883–88] 1968). A principal goal here is to overthrow the ethnocentrism that prevents a comprehensive inquiry into 9/11 by cloaking it in a strictly American context. To accomplish that, the essay ranges far: from contemporary responses to the disaster, media accounts of the war in Afghanistan, Chinese earthquakes,

Afghanistan of two thousand years ago, and on through the tenants and contents of the World Trade Center. Because Nietzsche proposed going “beyond good and evil” through a “revaluation of all values,” the essay takes up what may be the ultimate ethical question: the value of human life.

In a departure from Nietzsche, the essay proposes the application to 9/11 of a modern approach he may well have rejected: complexity theory. A crucial feature of that theory is “self-organized criticality,” the proposition that complex systems—including societies—arrange themselves through a series of checks and balances to the point that they are perpetually on the verge of undergoing fundamental transformation. That is the idea I apply to the earth-shaking, supposedly carved-in-stone Event of 9/11. It is a logic of things that just happen. And in that dreadful case, shit happened.

The reader should note that the essay was composed during the months following the attacks, and as such reflects the raw emotions of that time.

## Historical and Theoretical Perspectives

### *The History of American “Social Science”*

These essays follow that “little whiff of carrion” Nietzsche took to be the stimulus of a nascent human intellect. But what is behind that “little whiff”? Where is the actual carrion, the rotting corpse that gives off that stench? Not to mince words, where the discipline of anthropology and much of American social thought is concerned I suggest that rotting corpse is the entire edifice of American social research that took shape immediately after World War II. I believe future intellectual historians will look with amazement and horror at the formation at Harvard in 1946 of the Department of Social Relations and its official platform, if you will, as embodied in the major work of its first chairman, Talcott Parsons: *The Social System*, published in 1951. In that work Parsons launched the scheme of pattern variables to describe all social action and embedded them in a systems-theory framework mostly derived from Norbert Wiener and his concept of homeostasis (1948). Society, the social system, possessed a well-defined set of subsystems that interacted to produce homeostasis or stability. The *structure functioned* to maintain itself as a well-integrated, stable whole. This doctrine of “structural functionalism,” as it came to be called, spread from the temple of Harvard University to nascent sociology and anthropology departments across the United States; it became the gospel for indoctrinating future generations of social researchers.

The horror, the sheer intellectual dishonesty and travesty of all this, is that Parsons and his eminent cohorts (including an elder statesman of anthropology, Clyde Kluckhohn) advanced their theory at a time when the smoke had

hardly lifted from the great killing fields of World War II and when the stacks of rotting corpses still gave off a stench that should have been discernible even on the Harvard campus. Some seventy million people were killed in that war, and surely at least an equal number left maimed or with permanently blighted lives; how could any thinking person advance the grotesque idea that human society possessed an inherent rationality, coherence, *systematicness*? In the shock and shambles of the immediate postwar years it was incumbent on social thinkers to produce accounts of how social processes could lead, over the course of a few years, to cataclysm and genocide. Even if they lacked a sense of smell, Parsons et al. should have had the rudimentary vision to see that human society is inherently unstable, conflict ridden, forever teetering on the edge of chaos. Things just do not make sense; events cannot be slotted into neat analytical categories. Humanity is the very opposite of system theory's favorite metaphor, the thermostat, which operates on the principle of change things a little bit this way, then change them back the other way, and keep going so that you maintain, yes, *homeostasis*. A far more accurate metaphor for the nature and fate of humanity, as I have suggested here, is a runaway train: it is barreling down the tracks, completely out of control, and God knows what it is going to hit. But instead of anything like this, the entire academic establishment labored mightily, and at the highest levels, and came up with the totemic AGIL four-square box to describe all social action. It bore a suspicious resemblance to a university campus quadrangle.

### *Heading for the Scene of the Crash*

Anthropologists have known for years that the world Parsons and his coterie described does not exist, but they have had trouble coming up with a generally acceptable alternative. Here is not the place to launch into a “history of theory” discourse; I will simply note that the intractable problem of putting together a new theory of society-culture has led many, and probably the discipline of American cultural anthropology as a whole, to reject the very idea of “theory” itself as hopelessly burdened with elements of an imperialist past. The catchphrases are that any discourse masquerading as theory is far too “hegemonic” and “essentialist” to be objective. As some recent discussions have asked, how can you hope to “decolonize” anthropology when the field is a product and, historically, standard bearer of colonialism (McGranahan and Rizvi 2016)?

Parsons et al. blatantly ignored the social ruins of the war and instead crafted their theory to fit what they saw as an emergent world order. Nation-states—some pre-existing such as Western democracies, others newly minted as in Africa and the Middle East—would provide the template for that order. As we know, and now more than ever, it has not worked out that way. The nation-state is everywhere under siege, on the verge of being torn

apart (or already destroyed) by the internal tidal forces of xenophobia, religious fanaticism, ethnic and racial violence, and a burgeoning population. And from the outside immensely powerful multinational corporations, richer than many nations, subvert national boundaries through a project of economic and ideological globalism. Yeats's profoundly disturbing poem, "The Second Coming," may require a certain reinterpretation of its famous line, "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold" (1919). The truth is, there is no center. Never was.

Hence the title of this book, *Heading for the Scene of the Crash*. In one of his better-known aphorisms Nietzsche advised that every truth should be accompanied by at least one joke. This is generally taken to mean that the heavy sledding of intellectual discussion should be broken from time to time with a little light relief, a momentary distraction from the work at hand. I suggest a different interpretation. Following Freud (who greatly admired Nietzsche) ([1905] 1960) and Mary Douglas (1999), the joke actually expresses and calls attention to a deeper, elemental meaning. It is a sudden outpouring of unconscious, repressed knowledge.

In that spirit, the joke I reference here as the linchpin of my arguments in the four essays (perhaps reminiscent of Lévi-Strauss's "key myth" in *Mythologiques*) is in fact a performance piece by the comic Ron White (2003), formerly of the Blue Collar Comedy Tour. White is overweight, boozy, crude, and, I think, funny as hell (but then my tastes are hopelessly lowbrow). The piece, which forms part of a longer show, is sometimes called "Plane Crash," though it goes by several labels. I doubt many anthropologists are familiar with the routine, which is a great pity (I heartily recommend it after a couple of hours spent slicing and dicing "precarity" and "alterity" in the pages of the *Ethnologist*). You really should check it out on YouTube. But for the comedically challenged, here is the piece rendered as the narrative of a myth.

Ron finds himself on a small commuter plane on a short hop from Beaumont to Houston, Texas. Midway through the flight the pilot announces that one of the plane's two engines has lost oil pressure and they are turning back to Beaumont. Ron observes that the other passengers are alarmed by the news. However, since he had been drinking all day, he did not much care what happened and called out to the pilot to go ahead and ditch, merely asking him to slam into something hard because he did not want to be stretchered off and live as a cripple. This talk terrifies the passenger sitting next to Ron, who, he notes, must have had a lot more to live for than he did. The passenger begins calling out to the flight attendant for reassurance about how far the plane could travel with only one engine. Offering his seatmate cynical reassurance, Ron turns to him and says, "All the way to the scene of the crash. Which is pretty handy, because that's where we're headed," adding that they will probably beat the emergency rescue crews there by a half-hour.

It is boorish to explain a joke, but since my argument pivots on it I must delve into it. The important question here is: Why is this funny? Earlier in his routine, White makes a series of jokes about the inadequacy of the plane (omitted from the above narrative), but these are all a lead-in to the punch line: “All the way to the scene of the crash . . . because that’s where we’re headed.”

I suggest that the effectiveness, not to say brilliance, of that punch line consists in its introducing the perspective of an outside, objective observer into an ongoing, deeply traumatic, and subjective experience (which it certainly was for White’s seatmate). If you are a passenger on that stricken plane, you are not thinking about just where it might crash—and you might die. On the contrary, your mind is in turmoil over what is happening at the moment. Are we losing altitude? Do the pilots still have control of the plane? Is the failed engine catching fire? Oh God, my family, my family. I don’t want to die!

Assume the plane crashes, killing all on board. Then the media vultures would swarm the wreckage, almost beating those paramedics referred to in the joke. And the news anchor would announce, in suitably somber tones, “We have John Kelly reporting from (ah yes) *the scene of the crash*.” Then cut to John, who delivers the gruesome news with the smoking wreckage nicely framed in the background. Or consider an air traffic controller at the Houston airport, monitoring the radar blips of the plane on his instruments, until those blips disappear and he is prepared to estimate *the scene of the crash*.

See my discussion of *perspective* in the essay on 9/11. Some three thousand persons died in the 9/11 attacks; the Afghan factional conflicts in Mazar-i-Sharif claimed eight or ten thousand. But the dead in 9/11 were Americans, and they died in the metropolitan heart of the nation. The dead in Mazar-i-Sharif, on the other hand, were Afghan tribesmen who fought and died in a place virtually unknown to an American audience. The value of human life is weighed on different scales.

The perspectival shift in “Plane Crash” is more fundamental and goes to the heart of our ongoing discussion regarding the nature of an *event*. At that heart is a paradox: The individual wholly caught up in an unfolding catastrophe cannot frame her experience as an “event” because she experiences it as an unbounded phenomenon. She lives the experience; she does not draw a mental line around it, classifying it as this-happened or that-happened. The subjective experience is incompatible with what comes later: an objective account fixing the third-party experience within some interpretive scheme. White’s joke succeeds so well because it forces the terminology “scene of the crash” and its accompanying objective perspective into the subjective experience of those on board the stricken plane, who know that something awful is about to happen, but cannot say just when or where.

Passengers aboard a doomed craft—it is a disturbing image that applies to much of human experience. Your life will end someday, but when, where,

how? And when the end comes you cannot know it as an event; that will come later, will be supplied by others. Your society, in these essays the United States, will become something wholly other. But what, and when? As an American you can only speculate, can only grasp at phantoms masquerading as facts. But you know you are on that journey, know you are headed for ...

(But it was fun while it lasted!)

## Note

1. Compare, for example, *Anthropology News* and *Savage Minds* in the United States with *Anthropology Today* and Open Anthropology Cooperative in Great Britain. There are now some excellent transatlantic hybrids: the series Prickly Pear Pamphlets begun by Keith Hart and Anna Grimshaw in Cambridge, England, which transmuted into Prickly Paradigm Press, edited by Marshall Sahlins and published through the University of Chicago. Extending this trend toward short, engaged work is the series *Critical Interventions: A Forum for Social Analysis* (Kapferer 2004–). *Anthropology News* is published by the American Anthropological Association and may be found at <http://www.anthropology-news.org> (retrieved 6 June 2017). *Savage Minds* may be found at <https://savageminds.org> (retrieved 6 June 2017). *Anthropology Today* is published by the Royal Anthropological Institute and may be found at <https://www.therai.org.uk/publications/anthropology-today> (retrieved 6 June 2017). The Open Anthropology Cooperative is perhaps unique in the anthropological community, for it is both open access and open comment. It may be found at <http://openanthcoop.ning.com/> (retrieved 7 June 2017).