A New History of Anthropology
Edited by Henrika Kuklick
Anthropological Regionalism
Rena Lederman

There is no doubt about the thematic importance, in contemporary social commentary, of wide-ranging movements of people, things, and ideas; of distant connections and hyphenated designations along with the assertions of rootedness and identification that arguments about these things may provoke reflexively. As a freshly sharpened awareness of our historical circumstances, these emphases pose a special challenge for the several disciplines—e.g., history, literary study, and anthropology—that define themselves around contextual understandings of cultural and historical particulars. They call into question the accepted strategies for demarcating the very contexts of understanding.

Among anthropology’s contexts of understanding, the regional (or “culture area”) organization of training and research has become particularly problematic. Just as it has motivated a redirection in interdisciplinary Area Studies funding, the challenges associated with awareness of globalization have prompted a rethinking of the regional organization of anthropological fieldwork. However, anthropology’s regional commitments are distinctive compared with both Area Studies and related disciplines. This chapter aims to specify that distinctiveness. Detailed consideration of the past generation’s productive revisionism suggests that anthropology’s regional traditions are diverse not just topically but also methodologically—a fact that both conventional and critical analyses have overlooked (e.g., Bernard 1994; Marcus 1995, 1998; cf. Fardon 1990b).

Generally, this chapter treats regional designations (like “Melanesia”) and the anthropological term “culture area” to indicate historically elaborated scholarly discourses and associated fieldworking practices, without necessarily implying the existence of locally meaningful—much less objective—geographical, linguistic, or ethnic categories (although here and there it might: e.g., Dirlik 1998). As “culture area” literatures and field practices go, Melanesian anthropology is especially interesting because of its central role in the history of the discipline: it is, for this reason (and others), the focus of the last part of this chapter. This literature has offered powerful, contradictory visions of the anthropological project: Melanesian communities have been represented both as “islands” of localized variation and microevolutionary development and as unbounded, ramifying networks of sociocultural and material relationships. Invoked as both exemplars of the different and the familiar, Melanesian practices have also long inspired important critical and reflexive arguments about cultural analysis, comparison, and translation (e.g., Wagner 1975; Strathern 1988).

Implicated in foundational scenes of so-called “real anthropology,” Melanesia is also completely implicated in contemporary “post-exoticist” (Clifford 1997) discourse concerning the fortunes of the discipline as a whole. While it may now be freshly problematized, throughout the century-long elaboration of metropolitan academic anthropology Melanesian ethnography has in fact been vanguard, paradigm, and anachronism all at once (although by no means always and everywhere in the same proportions). This review uses Melanesian work to estimate the value of the discipline’s distinctive style of regional study for its critical voice.

Anthropological Regionalism

Regional specialization has been a central component of Euro/American anthropological training and practice for much of this century. As Fardon (1990a: 24) has pointed out, its importance is evident in the social organization of the field—for example, in its professional associations and journals. Knowing (and being known in) your “place” is important in manuscript reviewing, hiring, and tenure evaluations. The importance of area specialization may vary among the national anthropological communities; individual scholars’ area commitments may be weaker in the United States than in Britain, for example. But even in the US those expectations are strong early in individual careers (when most field research gets done).

A Conditional Commitment

Since the early 1990s, we have come to a fresh recognition of the conditionality of our regional commitments, however. Appadurai (1986: 358) directed our attention to the “tendency for places to become showcases for specific issues” and, conversely, for these issues (or “gatekeeping” ideas) to stand for whole regions—for example, as in the identification of South Asian ethnography with debates about hierarchy (Appadurai 1988)—even when the concepts derived from parts of those regions or from an entirely different place (e.g., Dresch 1988). We have also come to recognize how a hierarchy of located topics (or thematized places) has structured research in the discipline as a whole (Hertzfeld 1987). I will consider these arguments in more detail below. For the moment, their importance is in highlighting the qualified character of regional specialization in anthropology; a mutually constitutive relation between ethnographic locations and comparative/theoretical topics is the legacy of the “culture area” discourses that have motivated anthropological regionalism for a good part of the twentieth century.
The term “culture area” originally referred to regions variously demarcated by turn-of-the-century ethnographic schools in the several national traditions. Credited to Clark Wissler (1938) by Alfred Kroeber (1939), the “culture area approach” was originally used, especially in Germany and the United States, as a classificatory framework for museum exhibits. Geographic contiguity implied relationship (if not necessarily homogeneity). From this perspective, ethnographic surveys and observations within an area promised to yield evidence of trait diffusion and to suggest culture history or patterning for some anthropologists (like Franz Boas, Ruth Benedict, and Melville Herskovitz) or functional determinacies, cross-cultural typologies, or developmental progressions for others (like G. P. Murdock, Julian Steward, or Leslie White).

The key point is that culture areas were at least equally about culture theories as about areas. They operated as heuristics, organizing grounded particulars for theoretical and comparative ends. Disciplinary sense-making styles have shifted over the past few generations: functional and neo-evolutionary forms have been marginalized in the wake of interpretive, historicizing, and critical ones. The relationships that many anthropologists seek to understand are not necessarily face-to-face or particularly personal. Nevertheless, our impulse to rethink anthropological locations — to demarcate “the field” (our space of primary research) in fresh ways — so as to take account of shifting topical interests is consistent with long-standing “culture area” practice.

An Already-global Regionalism

Anthropological regionalism is an already-global local knowledge: globalization was foundational for anthropology in ways that set the discipline apart. Thus, even as culture area constructs encoded (and often enough directly supported) racial and colonial hierarchies, they were not aligned with national borders and were at odds with (if not actively subversive of) the interests and naturalizing claims of nation-states (unlike the other social sciences; e.g., Ross 1991). At the same time as they privileged the study of certain peoples and topics, they nevertheless motivated and organized systematic consideration of those which were otherwise marginalized by the metropolitan focus of other disciplines. Finally, while classical fieldwork was indisputably local, the discipline has deployed topically focused ethnography to comparative/theoretical ends. On one hand, unlike in economics or politics, anthropological theory is mediated by a display of “cross-cultural” knowledge; on the other hand, unlike historical or literary studies, area specialization for its own sake can become a disability over an anthropological career.

However much we may now be especially conscious of global movements and interconnections, the phenomena associated with globalization are not new. Transnational movements were by some measures greater in the second half of the nineteenth century, when academic anthropology was just beginning, than during much of the twentieth century (Kristof 1999; Stille 2001). What is more, the centuries-long ramification of a modern “world system” — its ebbs and flows, and complex relation with the history of nationalism — has long been an object of interdisciplinary attention and debate (e.g., Braudel 1982; Wallerstein 1974).

Anthropologists have been swimming in these currents all along. The elaboration of a European world-system was an enabling condition of field-based, comparative analysis (features that have historically distinguished anthropology from the other social sciences: Ross 1991; Wallerstein 1986; Prewitt 2002). What is more, world-system effects have been a deliberate focus of critical, empirical attention in anthropology for a long time, and not just as “heterodox” undertcurrents (cf. Gupta and Ferguson 1997). For example, Franz Boas’s critique of early twentieth century racial ideologies was based on a policy-motivated study of European immigrants to the US (e.g., Baker 1998). Melville Herskovitz’s sustained interest in tracing African-American traditions across the Atlantic was an influential precursor of contemporary studies of the Black Atlantic.

Robert Vitalis reinforces this interpretation indirectly in an article the main concern of which was to provide a critical historical reframing of Area Studies. He argued that viewing the origins of Area Studies simply in a post-World War II Cold War logic obscures the influence of “international studies”: one academic reflex of the long-standing recognition of “globalization”. Calling the Journal of Race Development “the country’s first IR [international relations] journal” (2002: 12), he situated this cross-regional, interdisciplinary project before World War I and also specifically within the theoretical of race studies. This framework was prescient for including the US in a global perspective (something that conventional Area Studies never did, but that work sponsored by the Ford Foundation’s recent “Crossing Borders” initiative develops) and for resisting a simply state-centered perspective. Vitalis’s focus on historical precursors to Area Studies specifically placed Boas and Herskovitz actively and politically in this long history of “international race/relations/studies” (2002: 15). The implication is that a “global” framework was foundational in modern twentieth-century anthropology, however much our recent awareness refreshes our vision of it.

Anthropological Regionalism in Relation to Area Studies

The qualified nature of anthropological regionalism becomes more evident when juxtaposed to interdisciplinary Area Studies, with which it has been engaged in practical ways — though more so in some places (like East Asia) than in others (like the Pacific) — especially after World War II (e.g., Gupta and Ferguson 1997: 9). In the last few years, the funding agencies underwriting Area Studies programs have reallocated their support in favor of attention to phenomena that crosscut traditional areas. But while the challenge to Area Studies has been quite pointed, anthropology finds itself favorably situated by these moves.

Social Science Research Council/American Council of Learned Societies’s (subsequently, SSRC/ACLS) post-World War II funding of Area Studies programs was meant to end the parochialism of US social science and humanities scholarship,
disciplinarily separated from one another (as well as from non-US-based scholarly institutions) and substantively focused almost exclusively on Euro-American realities (Prewitt 1996c: 31–2). The Councils’ postwar funding structures aimed to elaborate linkages among the disciplines on the model of multidisciplinary classics programs that had existed prior to World War II (Rafael 1994). It also aimed to demonstrate the compatibility of “disciplinary” and “area” knowledge (Prewitt 1996b: 34) by setting up conditions meant to further it.

But the practical demands of the resulting institutional structures – notably, language training – created new regionalized separations. Additionally, because of the organizational subordination of Area Studies programs to disciplinary departments in universities, area knowledge (not to mention cross-area comparison) remained peripheral to work in economics, political science, and sociology.

An index of its elevation to the mainstream, “globalization” was the explicit motive for SSRC/ACL’s mid-1990s reorganization of their funding strategies and is the rationale for the Ford Foundation’s “Crossing Borders” project. The Councils have pulled out of the committed regional specialisms associated with Area Studies, now seen as undermining the study of transnational and other global processes. But they have reasserted their commitment to what Prewitt called “area-based” knowledge: that is, knowledge acquired through foreign “field study” in and of particular places but (contra existing Area Studies tendencies) this time applied to “processes, trends, and phenomena that transcend any given area” (1996c: 31–2). This reorientation is meant to discourage a purely analytic “globalism” that “float free of history and place” (1996c: 18; 1996c: 40).

Anthropologists are favorably positioned for such research because of the historical legacy of culture-area-style regionalism: its contingent, uneven involvement in Area Studies programs and its historical commitment to cross-area thinking. Anthropologists’ intertwined commitments both to field-based study of specific human experience in situated circumstances and to cross-area topics mean that disciplinary and area knowledge – to use Prewitt’s terms – are integral in anthropology in ways they are not in the other social sciences (2002).

From Armchair to Open Air Comparison

Despite the various ways in which anthropological regionalism already presumes a global frame of reference, significant rethinking has been necessary within the discipline, particularly with regard to how individual scholars demarcate their primary research spaces and conceptualize their readership. Throughout most of the twentieth century, versions of cross-cultural comparison – whether implicit in translation strategies or explicit in analysis – were key means for making local knowledge (both the anthropologist’s and his/her informants’) meaningful to likely readers of ethnography. This was, however, mostly an “armchair” activity. While fortunate practitioners seized opportunities for fieldwork in more than one place over their careers (e.g., Geertz 1995), juxtaposing relations, practices, and identities within or between regions was what anthropologists did with their own and other ethnographers’ published accounts when they were not doing primary (field) research.

This sort of “armchair” comparison has been progressively displaced from its central position in anthropological debate over the past generation. The very distinction between ethnography and comparison has itself been eroded not only by recognition that interpretation/analysis is implicated in description, but also by an intensifying interest in what many anthropologists now recognize as ethnographic objects and sources that traverse areas. Many anthropologists now demarcate their space of primary research (whether or not they call it “the field”) so as to focus on relations among people, things, and ideas in socially and geographically separated spaces. The taken-for-granted local/global distinction (as, say, orders of magnitude) has been progressively unsettled as anthropologists fix their sight/sites on institutions and relationships that motivate or mediate the movements and confusions of categories (Hirsch and Strathern 2004).

The result is in some ways been surprisingly close to the Boasian ideal articulated a century ago (Boas 1896; see also Hanauer 1989’s use of Kroeber). Joan Vincent associates this ideal with W. H. R. Rivers and his diffusionist allies in Britain (1990). Drawing on Vincent’s account of the diffusionist legacy, Gupta and Ferguson construe diffusionism as a “heterodox” alternative to canonical Malinowski’s ethnography (1997: 19–22); but the two appear on a more equal historical footing from a Melanesianist perspective. From this vantage, one notes that while Gupta and Ferguson (44) take Margaret Mead as an exemplar of the post-Boasian turn away from diffusionism, even they cannot avoid at least footnoting her involvement in acculturation studies. And one wonders where to “place” Malinowski’s own kula travels and heterogeneous sources in this picture (Wax 1972).

As if echoing these earlier interests, much contemporary work involves tracing the historical and contemporary connections among peoples, things, and ideas – what used to be conceived in terms of “diffusion,” “migration,” and “acculturation” within or across regions – on the basis of archival and field-based knowledge of those connections and their diverse authors. We have by now a wealth of significant ethnographic, historical, and textual studies, beginning at least in the 1970s with attention to colonial and postcolonial political-economic relations and representations, and expanding in the 1980s and afterwards to include transnational media, consumption and other cultural forms.

Reinforcing all this, Marcus’s vigorous advocacy of “multi-locale” or “multisited” fieldwork in the 1980s and 1990s has offered a much-needed methodological language in which these projects might be rephrased. While Marcus (1995) characterized his argument as prospective – as if genuine instances had not yet been put into practice – in fact, it is much more usefully viewed as an explicit general articulation of how many anthropologists have in practice been demarcating their research spaces for quite a while. This may be one reason why Marcus’s argument for multisited fieldwork is so multi-cited: his terms clearly capture – as familiar reference to “participant observation” or “fieldwork” may not – the heterogeneous sources on which many anthropologists actually rely.
Multiple Fields, Diverse Practices

I have so far discussed characteristics shared by anthropology’s regional traditions, by contrast to alternatives. They also diverge, not simply in the now obvious topical ways (Herzfeld 1984; Appadurai 1988) but also in largely unremarked organizational and practical ones. Unfortunately, however, the discipline’s methods literatures (both conventional and critical) presume one disciplinary practice as if it were a vast attic into which individual ethnographers climb to scavenge opportunistically. They rarely warn of differentiation in regional disciplinary practice – reason enough to suspect that no one set of prescriptions is likely to meet present challenges as they are faced in particular projects.

A Suggestive Overview

Among their organizational differences, regional discourses have divergent cross-disciplinary inflections insofar as they have each been influenced by differently configured Area Studies communities (or the lack thereof). For example, whereas Africanist anthropologists are likely to be in dialogue with historians, Latin Americanist ethnography has strong political economy influences. In contrast, research in the island Pacific along with Native America and several other anthropological “culture areas” were ignored by Area Studies funders like the SSRC (with potentially interesting implications; see Lederman, 1998: 432, n. 2). Intra-disciplinary influences among anthropology’s regional communities are uneven and shifting. Regional anthropologies have been differently positioned within the discipline as a whole (a point to which I will return). They also engage one another differently. For example, a dense interplay between Africanist and Melanesianist work specifically on questions of sociopolitical structure was arguably foundational for Melanesianists. In contrast, cross-talk among South Americanists and Melanesianists has been thin overall despite early interest in, for example, apparent similarities between features of male cults in these two areas (Gregor and Tuzin 2001).

At least some of this diversity is a function of the uneven regional involvements of the various metropolitan anthropologies. That is, waves of British (or French) anthropology in Africa and Dutch (or American) anthropology in Southeast Asia were associated with partially distinctive field practices, institutional styles, and topical/theoretical emphases. The varied shapes of work across areas is also a historical product of the especially powerful local influence of particular “schools”, teachers, and writers (e.g., Max Gluckman for central Africa, Ruth Benedict for Japan, Claude Lévi-Strauss for South America) or of a more decentralized array of influences (as in Melanesia).

What is more, given how directly engaged in the world anthropological fieldwork is, it would be surprising if regional non-academic institutions, politics, and sociocultural styles were not also key. For example, Kan (2001) and collaborators explore the importance of naming and adoption not only as topics to study, but as regionally distinctive modes of ethnographic access to Native American realities and means whereby Native Americans actively constrained what ethnographers might know; whereas, for example, adoption has not mediated ethnographic access this way in the Pacific. That is, regional cultural styles have themselves had a palpable (but largely unremarked) influence on anthropological research methods. Similarly, Schumačer’s (2001) Manchester/Rhodes-Livingston Institute-centered history reveals the importance of African field assistants as mediators and shapers of the ethnographic encounter in central Africa. By contrast, in a complex, rueful autobiographical reminisce, Clifford Geertz describes troubles between the interdisciplinary Harvard Social Relations team (a leaderless and “motley band” of graduate students of which he was one) and their local collaborators (1995: 104–9). The research, set up for the team and a score of Indonesian students by their Indonesian professors, followed a style inherited from a previous generation of Dutch scholars: formal, group interviews with rural village officials conducted at an old resort hotel. Having “the presumptuousness to find the arrangements . . . not to their liking,” the Americans successfully evaded the collaboration by lighting out for more distant provinces.

In these and other ways, the projects of metropolitan anthropologies encountered regional/national research communities of long or more recent standing, variously placed (or displaced as in the case of Argentina). They have become entangled with divergent artistic, practical, and activist interests (e.g., Hereniko and Wilson 1999; Warren 1998). Any proper history of “regional traditions” in anthropology would need to trace threads along these complex webs (see chapters 2–5 in this volume). Such a history might clarify how and why ethnographers are indeed “no longer at ease” (in all of China Achebe’s complex senses) with their familiar orienting distinctions (inside/ outside, home/native/exotic/foreign), making more evident the mutual impacts of transnational and regional forces.

Finally, implicated in the rest, regional ethnographic communities have different background expectations about scholarly practice – training, conferencing, publishing – including the conduct of fieldwork itself; e.g., expectations about language competence, conditions for obtaining research permissions (affiliations, cooperation, and other obligations), the duration of fieldwork, and (as noted above) kinds of incorporation into field settings. A commitment to intensive language learning before and during graduate school may be conventional in Middle Eastern studies, but not for those who work in the Pacific (where one often cannot do much until one has arrived). While long-term fieldwork may be commonplace in Papua New Guinea, short trips are the norm in Brazil as a function of an active national anthropological community.

All this appears obvious, once noted. Their obvious particularity and their diversity may explain why disciplinary histories resist being told from the perspective of fieldworking practices and are told instead from a national (especially metropolitan) perspective. Unlike explicit contestation over the comparative method (e.g., Barnes 1987) or over American anthropology’s four subfield relations (Lederman 2005), the Babel of regional ethnographies has gone largely unremarked, at least in the US. (Given
their training emphases, it is not surprising that British anthropologists are more aware: e.g., Fardon 1990a; Dresch and James 2000.)

A Closer Look

The diversity of anthropology's regional traditions did become more evident with reflexive attention to ethnographic writing in the 1980s. These interventions helped us to appreciate the interdependence of anthropological theory (that is, the relatively explicit assumptions driving and framing cultural and comparative analyses) on the situated contingencies of fieldwork and ethnographic writing.

In his brief but influential response to Sherry Ortner's "Theory in Anthropology since the 60s," Arjun Appadurai (1986: 356–7) observed that Ortner had not explicitly identified "the significance of place in the construction of anthropological theory in the period since World War II," whereas, in fact, theory in anthropology derives from "going elsewhere" [his emphasis], preferably somewhere geographically, morally, and socially distant from that of the anthropologist. His key argument about the dependence of anthropological theory on distinctive placedness concerned the reliance on "gatekeeping concepts": "concepts... that seem to limit anthropological theorizing about the place in question."

Appadurai's argument was motivated by the problematic of hierarchy, in two senses. First, he argued that the discipline marginalizes certain places, privileging others. He argued that anthropology has had a habit of treating "the small, the simple, the elementary, the face-to-face" found in African, South American, or Pacific places as more emphatically "elsewhere" than the "complex civilizations" of India or China. Consequently, topics associated with these privileged places—kinship, gift exchange—have been "prestige zones" of anthropological theory. Conversely, Appadurai noted, "complexity, literacy, historical depth, and structural messiness" have been excluded since they are not distinctive to these central "zones" of discourse. Second, Appadurai suggested that the anthropology of civilizations is particularly susceptible to the reductionism of "gatekeeping concepts." Thus, questions about "hierarchy" dominate anthropological work in India (just as the "honor/shame" dialectic dominates Mediterranean research, and so on). Admitting that mononemic simplifications also distort work in Polynesia, Native America, and other places that we associate with face-to-face societies, he nevertheless emphasized that they are "espiously pronounced in the case of complex societies." In a review of contemporary Indian ethnography, Appadurai (1988) made clear how an obsession with caste had distorted representations of South Asia.

Appadurai's point that apparently general or comparative discourse in anthropology has covered regional sources and limitations was sharp and fruitful. He outlined an ambitious set of questions (1986: 359) to which we still have no panoramic response: e.g., concerning the impact of founding works and authors, the shifting receptivity of host governments to anthropological work and changes in the priorities of funding agencies, and other complex interplays between local research practice and the dynamics of research institutions in regional and metropolitan centers.

Nevertheless, two aspects of the argument are worth critical reconsideration. The first is the relationship between gatekeeping ideas and regional specialization. The second is the "simple" society/"complex" society dichotomy.

Consider for whom gatekeeping concepts work. Appadurai's brief paper was not specific, but seemingly to suggest that they foiled the work of specialists (regional field-workers). In a remarkably overlooked collection, Richard Fardon (1990b) addressed this question explicitly a few years later, suggesting that, rather than being important in the critical engagement of regional specialists with one another, gatekeeping constructs may in fact be reproduced as a tactic in popularizing and teaching. It may similarly affect new researchers beginning fieldwork in an area: providing selective entrance into a specialization (the question being what happens once one is "in"). This suggests an important qualification to Appadurai's argument. Gatekeeping simplifications ("lineage" or "caste," "nation," or "class") may be shaped as much by anthropologists' comparative or theory projects as by their actual regional specialist work. If these concepts are packages designed for comparative analyses and for teaching, then their effects may be less "gatekeeping" than "exporting." Are they more like *lingua franca* elaborated to facilitate exchanges in distinctive disciplinary and inter-disciplinary trading zones, and less like regulators of the internal dynamics of regional literatures?

We might pursue this possibility, following the uses of one such construct (see also Fardon, 1990a: 26–7): e.g., "lineage," so complexly enwined in the Africanist colonial history of British structural-functionalism (Kuper 1982), where Dresch (1988) has reminded us it was already derivative. We can follow "lineage" out of Africa to Highland New Guinea where it was applied and contested from the outset (Barnes 1962). While the first generation of Highland researchers, working in the 1950s, approached their work with simplified, "good enough" glosses of Africanist segmentary lineage models as conceptual bridges, the derivation of these constructs was clear.

That is, early Highlands ethnographers were conscious of the exogenous and heuristic character of "lineage." They did not overgeneralize it: rather they noted its cultural particularity as grounds for their own critical and creative contributions. Not only did Melanesianist research make clear the apparent "Africanness" of the lineage model, over the next generation it expanded its challenge by calling the solidarity of its Durkheimian sociological bedrock into question as well (e.g., Wagner 1974).

Intensively over the first two decades of Highlands research, the "lineage" idea was applied, bent, modified, qualified, and discarded. Researchers leaned on and debated one another's work, elaborating an internally critical cacophony of comparative proposals: exploring, qualifying, or rejecting the others' syntheses and systematizations (e.g., see Lederman 1986a). On the one hand, another set of terms—partially derived from Europeanist anthropology ("loosely structured" societies, "non-groups," "networks": e.g., Watson 1970; see Boissevain 1968)—were explored. Melanesian language categories ("big names," "lines of power": Strathern 1984) were adapted or used outright. On the other hand, an argument was joined directly with Africanist anthropology, both early on and in what Andrew Strathern (1982) called a "second wave" of African models in the New Guinea Highlands.
The point is that "lineage" was not used as a gatekeeper by specialists in their basic research and critical analysis. Exported from Africa to Highland New Guinea, "lineage" did not limit the questions asked by Melanesian fieldworkers but acted as a productive irritant. Inter-regional differences—at least as much as the apparent similarities that enabled the use of "lineage" as a bridgehead term—were a stimulus for discussion and research. Finally, not only was the conscious, reciprocal, critical engagement across several regional traditions ethnographically productive, but it definitely did not respect the distinction between "simple" and "complex" societies that Appadurai employed in his argument.

The same can also be said about "the gift," a notion just as ambivalently located in the Pacific as "lineage" in Africa. If gift exchange acquired a privileged association with Pacific ethnography in the wake of Malinowski's Kula and Mauss's *mao*, then this has also been the scene of that construct's reworking (e.g., Weiner 1980). As in the case of "lineage," the regional specialist literature qualified this received category by means of an intensive consideration of Melanesian categories and practices, and their entanglements with economic markets. As in the cases of other rich comparative categories that prompt reciprocal engagements across languages and cultures, "the gift" has been taken up productively in other regional literatures within and outside anthropology, similarly traversing the simple/complex distinction (e.g., Davis 2000; Finley 1965; Tittmuss 1972).

This leads me to the second aspect of Appadurai's argument that needs review. Appadurai's argument about the hierarchical ordering of regional anthropologies was built around a problematic but pervasive dichotomy of "simple" and "complex" societies. He suggested that gatekeeping concepts foils the work of specialists in India, China, and other complex societies especially. Arguing that anthropological theory is quintessentially derived from work in the most elsewhere of others, he suggested that one cannot make a truly successful career in "metropolitan" anthropology if one does not study kinship/gift exchange and the like. What is more, while conventional comparative analyses might work using data from simple societies, it was completely inapplicable to complex societies. But this argument had two unfortunate implications. It implied that abstracting small-scale social orders was unproblematic, as if Pacific or African communities were actually simple, and not themselves characterized by "complexity, literacy, historical depth, and structural messiness" (as if they were the same in their differences from complex societies). It also implied that the disciplinary positioning of the several "civilization" discourses were similar, despite their historically salient, politically charged differences (e.g., a variously orientalized Middle East (or Japan), a normalized and bracketed Europe.

These two implications return us to the problem with which this chapter began: that anthropologists may underestimate the differences among their regional literatures. Indeed, "gatekeeping" constructs—as modes of packaging increasingly subtle (inaccessible) regional discourses for non-specialist consumption within and outside the discipline—may help reproduce an illusion of homogeneity in the act of facilitating communication. Appadurai's own argument rolls the contradiction tight: in making the case against the marginalization of South Asian complexity, it accepts the "simple societies" package. But this rhetorical convenience helps reproduce the very stereotype burdening public perceptions of anthropological generally.

The argument also risks running afoul in another way, in so far as the disciplinary position of research in other "complex" societies is different from that of South Asia. A brief comparison of India with Greece might be instructive. Herzfeld (1986) has argued that a key challenge in understanding Greek self-representations is the ready access foreign researchers have to the nationalist "Hellenic" cultural model. But Greek culture is structured in terms of a dialectic between that more public, other-directed, idealized and classically European self-representation and a demotic, insider's model that Herzfeld terms "Romic" (a version of the gendered "appearance," "reality" distinction that Ernestine Friedl (1967) drew). Associated (partially) with private social identities, the Romic model also admits to more recent, non-European (e.g., Turkish) entanglements. Herzfeld emphasizes the relativity of the distinction, their ability to trade values, and their resonance across Greek discursive domains within households, between nations.

Herzfeld uses this analysis of Greek self-representations in a subtle critique of the distinctive positioning of Greece (and then Europe) in anthropological discourse, emphasizing a dialectic of contradictory representations simultaneously in play. Set beside Appadurai's argument, this analysis makes clear that the stereotypification and marginalization of the anthropology of Greece and of India have quite different rhetorical and political economic dynamics, emerge from different fieldworker positioning (in the Greek case, clearly a version of the local social dialectic), and require different correctives.

At least with respect to the simple/complex distinction, Appadurai is certainly not unique for strategically overlooking the diversity of anthropological regional traditions in the interest of a tight argument. The oversight is worth mentioning, in this instance, because of its irony. It is as if the South Asian inflections of the critique were obscured in the rush to expose the regionalisms more generally implicit in theory. As a way of avoiding the same, my argument moves into the regional literature I know best to develop a final point, accepting the limitations that such grounding also entails.

**Melanesian Regionalism**

If the viability of anthropology in the twenty-first century hinges on our response to charges of "exoticism," Melanesianist work would appear to be in the hot seat. The (not strictly academic) image of "Melanesia"—in the figures of Bronislaw Malinowski (e.g., 1922) and then Margaret Mead (e.g., 1935), both able popularizers—has come to stand for anachronism: field studies of small-scale societies that bracket historical currents and extra-local influences to focus on the exotic practices of an homogeneous Self-defining Other. But to what degree is this "Melanesia" present in the actualities of Melanesianist anthropology (or, indeed, in those of Melanesians), as is implied in arguments that our analytical means need now to catch up with a worldly reality in
which, e.g., cultures are “no longer” spatially bounded, homogeneous or historically unaware, implying that they once were so?

A corollary question might be how Melanesian anthropology might most productively enact disciplinary self-criticism and redirection. In what ways has the emphasis on difference – for which this literature is renowned – lost or retained its critical value? Will studies of resource exploitation by multinationals or of adventure tourism in Melanesia necessarily help dislodge disciplinary and regional stereotypes or will only certain approaches to these topics do? Are studies of mythology, witchcraft, or exchange passé or will their value be renewed?

Globalizing Anthropology in Melanesia

Contemporary Melanesian ethnography has been struggling with these questions (for bibliographic references relevant to this discussion, please consult Lederman 1998). Recent works on contemporary Melanesia have included monographs and collections on Melanesian historical experience and representations of regional and global relationships; counter-colonial movements and discourses; self-making and personhood; the cultural construction and political economy of contemporary gender interests; the making of national cultures; and the localization and exportation of transnational corporations. Regionally focused works consistently offer theoretically and topically organized arguments that connect local ethnography with discipline-wide concerns about identities, borders, property-forms and our representations of these things. Collections with a Pacific-wide focus contain important Melanesianist contributions on, for example, the social upheaval attendant on the destruction of material culture and creation of Christian households and on the contemporary legacy of colonial “racial” hierarchies. Other recent work has concerned language shift and loss, media and advertising, collective violence, emergent class interests, and the spread of STDs.

Throughout contemporary Melanesian studies, it is common to find detailed ethnographic descriptions elaborated in relation to equally well developed theoretical and comparative framings. That the ethnography connects itself explicitly with larger disciplinary and interdisciplinary trends is nothing new, however. Melanesianist anthropology has typically been extroverted. By and large, these works carry on the regional habit of contextualized and layered analysis of extended case materials, now integrating face-to-face fieldwork with the analysis of media and documentary sources. They seek out the cultural/historical specificities of novel relationships and discourses so as to understand cultural innovations or erosions in the Pacific – or to refresh our perspective on familiar problems present elsewhere.

This literature also acts on the criticisms of ethnographic representation at large in anthropology. Indeed, Melanesianist anthropology has its own history of textual innovation (e.g., Bateson 1936). These have included, for example, intercultural collaborations, multiply-voiced histories of first contact, contextualized biographies, and reflections on the use of other anthropologists’ field notes. As Keening and Jolly (1992) note, recent work has tended to make explicit the position of the observer, and to attend to Melanesian criticism of the anthropological project (e.g., Dirlik 1998; Hereniko and Wilson 1999; Foerster and Gilliam 1992). Critical of the literature to which it is contributing – including the regional designation and its boundaries – recent work is engaged directly in a struggle over the contradictory implications of “exoticism.”

In that struggle, discontinuities may legitimately be emphasized over continuities. It needs to be emphasized, however, that the boundary between newer Melanesianist work inspired by a transdisciplinary focus on globalization, and older work on colonial and postcolonial transformations and the dilemmas of development, is not so clear (e.g., Worsley 1987). Melanesian anthropology also has a venerable history of applied socioeconomic research, accessible mostly locally (e.g., the Waigani seminar volumes, New Guinea Research Bulletins, Research School of Pacific Studies working papers and the like).

One notable intervention at the juncture between scholarly critique and activism, and frontal assault on the “savage slot,” is Lenora Foerster and Angela Gilliam’s collection, Confronting the Margaret Mead Legacy: Scholarship, Empire, and the South Pacific. A commentary on marginalizing objectifications and their historical repercussions (not to say fallout), the collection is integrated by its assessment of Mead’s work and its advocacy of a nuclear-free Pacific – made necessary by the political invisibility such representations help to create.

What is extraordinary about this analytically unpretentious collection is its combination of passion and complexity: it makes a challenging model for the critique of anthropology within and outside Melanesian studies. The editors and their contributors, about half being Melanesian, present an unstrained diagnosis of Mead’s paternalism together with a feminist appreciation of her attention to sociocultural change and her efforts to popularize anthropology as cultural criticism. In equally complex counterpoint, the collection offers John Waiko’s invocation of the value of deeply situated, “insider” knowledge. In his essay, Waiko thoroughly relativizes his own insiderhood by means of an account of his efforts to submit his history dissertation not only to his Australian university committee but also to Binandere community elders. In this way, he demonstrates how mutually exotic interests and positioning might be negotiated and articulated.

Mead’s and Waiko’s active efforts to bridge the chasm between scholarly and lay discourse are both steps toward a “post-exoticist” world: they also enable us to consider the riskiness of such dispersed authority. Waiko’s demonstrates the ground to be gained through reflexive engagement, whereas Mead’s serves to warn about the historically shifting valences of an effective public voice.

Conventional Provocations

Melanesianist anthropology has been implicated in “heterodox” trends since, so to speak, before the beginning. Malinowski’s showmanship may have been key to uprooting social evolutionism in British anthropology, but the way had already been cleared for him
by W. H. R. Rivers (1914) who converted from evolutionism to diffusionism midway through his analysis of his own Melanesian field materials. Indeed, if diffusionism is nowadays being reclaimed as precursory to contemporary trends, it has roots in Melanesianist ethnography.

Trans-local regionalism, we might say, is an inescapable ethnographic reality in this part of the world. It appears in the work of anthropologists of all theoretical persuasions and several subfields (including linguistics and archaeology): from Mead (1938) – for whom the Arapesh were an “importing culture” – through numerous studies of ritual and exchange systems linking regional populations and village/clan/island communities in unstable relations of power and value (e.g., Biersack 1995), and onwards to studies of mythopolitical geographies (e.g., Wagner 1967; Runnson and Weiner 2001).

These ethnographies of regional relationships often explore *indigenous* comparative discourses and relational identities (Lederman 1991a). For example, representations of movement and both “internal” and “external” difference are prominent in accounts of cosmology and myth (e.g., Wagner 1967; Weiner 1988). The syncretic openness or improvisational inventiveness of indigenous discourses (Wagner 1975) is also evident in anthropological histories of first contacts, colonial entanglements, political economic articulations, and gender constructions.

Melanesian cultural styles have presented disorienting challenges to key ideas in academic social theory. For example, arguments about modernity, for all their productivity across the disciplines, presume a modern/post-modern polarity predicated on “the premodern” – a hodge-podge of the exotic, the rural, the timeless – as a shadowy, illegitimate, background term, even within anthropology. Melanesianist ethnography presents images cutting across these distinctions (and at the same time forcing readers to face this otherwise-residual category head-on). Indeed, regional ethnography had a hard time imagining Melanesian cultures as premodern even when developmental progressions were fashionable. The ethnographic literature has confronted this challenge in two (related) ways. It has pursued an extreme elaboration of regional comparativism (in the form of endlessly dueling typologies, a cacophony of competing models); it has also explored critical translations ethnographically, but in ways that engage categories of significance way outside the region.

As far as typology-building goes, rhetorically unstable analogies abound, dismantled sometimes even in the act of construction: for example, local exchange practices and ideas have been called “capitalist” and “entrepreneurial,” or they have looked like capitalism’s opposite and then, inevitably, both and neither (e.g., Gregory 1987) in multiple ways. Nowadays, as I have suggested, long-standing descriptions of Melanesians’ apparently iconoclastic, improvisational cultural style of dealing with novelty is providing fresh angles on transnational policy concerning intellectual and cultural property (Hirsch and Strathern 2004).

Local ethnography has surely succumbed to – even luxuriated in – the comparativist temptations that these sorts of decontextualizing translations present (Lederman 1991b). But the arguments those efforts have engendered also often motivated another sort of move. Never simply ethnographic even as it was always elaborately committed to contextualized cases, this regional literature has also resisted Us/Them objectifications. Instead, a more complex movement between extra-regional sources and vigorous argument within the regional studies community has fostered progressively more nuanced and constrained (less transparent, more difficult) translations. Accessibility has often been lost, surely (as novice readers testify); however, it is a mistake to diagnose this as “exoticist” invocation. These challenging translations enact Trouillot’s call for serious attention to diverse lower-case others; articulating explicitly with trans-regional social theory, they are an important reason why Melanesianist ethnography retains its destabilizing value in twenty-first-century anthropology.

Conclusion

The recent formation of problem-motivated area organizations by North Americans and Europeanists suggests that regional discourses have not yet outlined their usefulness as disciplinary means even at anthropological projects and audiences expand and change. Like other scholarly products, ethnography is honed by professional networks of readers oriented to one another by a “prior citational world” and by experiential conditions favoring “cross-checking” (Appadurai 1997). Although perceptibly less so nowadays than in the past, regional communities remain as key practical loci of this simultaneously normalizing and innovating sociability (especially early in academic careers), whereas I suspect that the critical influences of other specialist reading/conferencing networks are diffuse or shifting by comparison. There is no doubt that the situation is changing. Nevertheless, while this chapter’s larger argument cautions against inferences across areas, its consideration of Melanesianist work suggests that the discipline’s regional engagements have an as-yet unexhausted power to inspire and authorize individual anthropologists’ contributions both within and outside the discipline.

Further Reading
