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## KINKY EMPIRICISM

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It is time for anthropology to reclaim the empirical. But this reclaiming must be accompanied by a rethinking of what empiricism means. What I'd like to affirm in this article—and have attempted to practice in my recent research—is a kind of empiricism that builds on the singular power of anthropological ways of knowing the world. A kinky empiricism: kinky, like a slinky, twisting back on itself, but also kinky, like S and M and other queer elaborations of established scenarios, relationships, and things. An empiricism that admits that one never gets to the bottom of things, yet also accepts and even celebrates the disavowals required of us given a world that forces us to act. An empiricism that is ethical because its methods create obligations, obligations that compel those who seek knowledge to put themselves on the line by making truth claims that they know will intervene within the settings and among the people they describe.

There are several reasons why now is a good time for anthropologists to insist on the empirical nature of what they do. The new kinds of interchanges in which anthropologists are now engaged create obligations of a particularly pressing sort. There is a price of admission to the politically fraught arenas that anthropologists are increasingly entering. As I have learned in my work in the troubled Indonesian territory of West Papua, paying this price can require us to write and speak authoritatively on issues that matter to the people we have studied. But all too often, anthropology has appeared to outsiders as having a tangential relationship to the empirical, producing knowledge that is too partial, too particular, too relativistic or

2 theoretical to bear on real world questions. However mistaken, such views reflect  
3 the long shadow cast by the 1980s, a time when many anthropologists developed  
4 new allegiances in the humanities. In reclaiming the empirical for anthropology,  
5 we must contend with the legacy of this époque in the discipline's development.  
6 In writings demonized as steering anthropology away from "reality" that one finds  
7 the clearest expression of the epistemology that is implicitly embraced by the  
8 best practitioners of the discipline. These writings make the case for a kinky kind  
9 of empiricism, an empiricism that takes seriously the situated nature of what all  
10 thinkers do.

11 Sometimes to find the way forward, one must begin by looking back. In the  
12 first half of this article, I consider two sources for the ingredients for the kinky  
13 empiricism that I would like to affirm as a critical dimension of contemporary  
14 anthropology. The first is *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986), which, I argue,  
15 helped add to the phenomena open to anthropological enquiry by foregrounding  
16 the circumstances of ethnography. The second is the work of David Hume, whose  
17 epistemology, I argue, proves surprisingly resonant with the empiricism implicitly  
18 endorsed in *Writing Culture*. Following the lead of Gilles Deleuze, Brian Massumi,  
19 and others who have read Hume in new ways, I consider how this 18th-century  
20 philosopher, like *Writing Culture's* contributors, sketched out an empiricism that  
21 was both skeptical and ethical because it included among its objects of inquiry the  
22 apparatuses through which reality is known.

23 My aim is not simply descriptive; it is also polemical. Kinky empiricism is  
24 a position I would like anthropology to embrace. But it is also a position that  
25 brings with it dangers as well as possibilities. In the final section of this article,  
26 I turn to my research in Dutch New Guinea and the pitfalls of ways of knowing  
27 that anthropologists and colonial officials have shared. I end by considering a  
28 recent ethnography that responds to these dangers and possibilities in a particularly  
29 compelling way. Kinky empiricism is always slightly off kilter, always aware of  
30 the slipperiness of its grounds and of the difficulty of adequately responding to  
31 the ethical demands spawned by its methods. Being off-kilter is a strength, not a  
32 weakness. For anthropology, it is what comes with getting real.

### 33 34 **BACKWARD LOOK ONE**

35 In the 1980s, the potted history of our discipline goes, anthropology turned  
36 left while its sister disciplines turned right. Significant subgroups within psychol-  
37 ogy, political science, economics, and sociology began adopting mathematical  
38 models and quantitative methods, and crafted experiments aimed at producing

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2 generalizable findings. Anthropology, for its part, looked inward, producing self-  
3 indulgent, jargon strewn texts that only the initiated could understand. Silliness  
4 ruled the day. “I’ve talked enough about me,” the “postmodern” anthropologist in  
5 the famous joke says to an informant. “What do you think about me?” “What’s the  
6 difference between a gangster and a postmodernist?” another joke goes. “A post-  
7 modernist gives you an offer you can’t understand.” For purveyors of this potted  
8 history, the move toward dialogue and partial truths represented a retreat from  
9 empirical research—above all from the kind of empirical research on colonized and  
10 formerly colonized peoples and cultures for which the discipline long was known.  
11 And when anthropology did finally come to its senses, the potted history goes on,  
12 it turned its attention to colonialism and science: the peoples and cultures that gave  
13 birth to anthropology. The fervor of the 1980s left anthropology unauthorized to  
14 claim to know others; the best we could do was know ourselves.

15 I do not believe in this potted history, even though it was foisted on me at  
16 a tender disciplinary age. (The second person to introduce me to anthropology  
17 was Steve Sangren, a Marxist anthropologist of the Terry Turner persuasion who  
18 wrote a critique of *Writing Culture* and other “postmodern” works that appeared in  
19 *Current Anthropology* shortly before I arrived at Cornell [1988]. The first person to  
20 introduce me to anthropology was Jim Siegel, a student of Clifford Geertz who  
21 was so idiosyncratic in his orientation to the discipline that the first course I took,  
22 “Political Anthropology,” had a syllabus that consisted exclusively of serialized  
23 novels in colonial Malay.)<sup>1</sup> This potted history makes me squirm whenever I  
24 confront it, which is usually in conversations with other social scientists. It’s way  
25 too easy to get sucked into the narrative. “But we’ve left those bad old days behind!”  
26 I find myself saying. “We’re doing all kinds of hard-nosed work!” When we open  
27 *Writing Culture* and actually read it, a different view of the “bad old days” comes  
28 into focus. *Writing Culture* provides a warrant for an anthropological empiricism  
29 that takes on more reality, not less.

30 The reality taken on by *Writing Culture* takes two forms. On the one hand, the  
31 chapters in the collection extend the range of empirical phenomena open to inquiry  
32 outward and criticize those who have limited their studies’ scope. Renato Rosaldo  
33 (1986) discusses the pacification campaigns undertaken in the Sudan shortly before  
34 Evans-Pritchard contracted “Nueritis” trying to extract information about local  
35 politics from his understandably reticent Nuer informants. Vincent Crapanzano  
36 (1986) criticizes Clifford Geertz’s famous essay on the Balinese cockfight for failing  
37 to provide enough empirical evidence to substantiate Geertz’s claims. “We must go  
38 further” is a refrain repeated throughout *Writing Culture*—we must say more about

2 the intellectual settings and professional imperatives that are shaping our discipline,  
3 Paul Rabinow (1986) tells us (see also Marcus 1986b); we must say more about  
4 the interplay of social phenomena on different levels and scales, George Marcus  
5 (1986a) insists. This dimension of *Writing Culture* reflects what I see as a key strength  
6 of the discipline. Because we don't set the parameters of admissible data from the  
7 get-go, anthropologists are arguably able to be more empirical than social scientists  
8 constrained by survey instruments and the need for large samples. We sacrifice  
9 what statisticians call statistical validity, but we gain construct validity: a higher  
10 level of confidence that we are doing justice to a messy reality. *Writing Culture* queers  
11 this second kind of validity. The chapters reveal a kinky penchant for thoroughly  
12 specifying the messy reality with which anthropologists are concerned.

13 On the other hand, the chapters in *Writing Culture* also, more famously, extend  
14 the range of empirical phenomena open to inquiry inward toward the research and  
15 writing process itself (see Clifford 1986a, 1986b; Fischer 1986; Tyler 1986).  
16 Taking the quest for construct validity to an extreme, *Writing Culture's* empiricism  
17 becomes kinky in a second sense: this empiricism loops back on itself. In bringing  
18 ethnography's dialogic character clearly into view, the collection raises ethical  
19 questions about the enterprise, questions to which some contributors responded  
20 by calling for writing practices that more fully represented informants' voices in  
21 a work. In the years since *Writing Culture* was published, linguistic anthropologists  
22 have provided us with a sophisticated understanding of the issues raised by the  
23 book's kinky obsession with reflexivity (see Lucy 1993; Silverstein 1976). As  
24 *Writing Culture's* authors knew well, dialogue never happens between just two  
25 sides (see Bakhtin 1981; see also Feldman 1991; Keane 1997.<sup>2</sup> Bearing the traces  
26 of long histories of interaction, dialogue also never happens in just one setting  
27 but, rather, requires the bringing into relevance of institutions that authorize,  
28 valorize, and lend prestige to speakers' words (see Silverstein 2004; see also Agha  
29 2007). Dialogue is always fraught with ethical conundrums. To converse is to  
30 engage in an exchange of gestures. To exchange is to receive and to receive is to  
31 confront the impossible demand to give others their due. For anthropologists, the  
32 conundrums multiply. Fieldwork generates both debts and identities in the back  
33 and forth through which interlocutors create a sense of what they are up to and  
34 who they are. Anthropologists find themselves compelled to do right by a cultural  
35 other that fades into a specter as soon as they think hard about what they do.<sup>3</sup> This  
36 second dimension of kinky empiricism—its slinky effect, as we might call it—eats  
37 away at certainty as well as good conscience. When anthropologists look closely at  
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2 their own research practices, it becomes clear that partial truths are the best they  
3 can do.

4 What I see as the most important contribution of *Writing Culture* is this coupling  
5 of the empirical and the ethical. What I have described as two realities are really  
6 just aspects of one: the messy reality in which ethnography lives. Unfortunately,  
7 readers of the collection haven't always recognized that, for *Writing Culture*, looking  
8 outward and looking inward are two sides of the same kinky coin.<sup>4</sup> To some degree,  
9 *Writing Culture*'s authors and contributors were complicit in perpetrating this view,  
10 adding references to empirical "standards" almost as an afterthought. In fact, there  
11 is nothing inconsistent or incoherent about the implicit epistemology articulated  
12 in *Writing Culture*. The reflexive turn in anthropology has expanded, rather than  
13 contracted, the discipline's power to represent reality. The ethical challenges that  
14 have come out of this recognition are indicative of how much more, rather than  
15 less, anthropology is trying to say about the empirical world. I think we can do a  
16 better job of defining and defending this dimension of our discipline. But this may  
17 require yet another look backward—to an early champion of empiricism, a thinker  
18 whom at least one contributor to *Writing Culture* may have too hastily dismissed.  
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#### 20 **BACKWARD LOOK TWO**

21 Eighteenth-century philosopher, friend of Adam Smith, "a man of letters and,  
22 in a mild manner, a man of affairs," as one biographer puts it, David Hume would  
23 seem an odd patron saint for today's anthropologists (see Macnabb 1962:28). Born  
24 in 1711, Hume entered Edinburgh University at the age of ten and encountered  
25 the writings of John Locke as a teenager before decamping for France. There, in  
26 his early twenties, he wrote his magnificent flop, *A Treatise of Human Nature* and  
27 made friends with Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whom he "imported to England" and  
28 provided with a house, a dog, a mistress, and a pension from the King. ("But  
29 nothing would persuade Rousseau that Hume was not secretly plotting his ridicule  
30 and humiliation," D. C. G. Macnabb [1962:28–29] reports). "The relationship  
31 ended in a spectacular quarrel. In self-justification, Hume was forced to publish  
32 the correspondence, from which it is abundantly clear that the only man who ever  
33 hated Hume was mad.") Hume himself never married, preferring to live with his  
34 sister and a cat. Whatever Hume's erotic proclivities—he seems less kinky than  
35 quirky by this account—his thinking clearly had twists.<sup>5</sup> Giving with one hand  
36 and taking with the other, leading the careful reader on a conceptual loop, Hume  
37 proclaimed that all knowledge begins in experience. But he also argued that we  
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2 have no real reason to trust experience or to believe that what has happened in the  
3 past provides a basis for predicting what is to come.

4 Hume was, among other things, an epistemologist, and hence a proponent of  
5 a breed of thinking dismissed in Paul Rabinow's chapter in *Writing Culture* as "an  
6 accidental, but eventually sterile, turning in Western culture" (Rabinow 1986:234).  
7 But as Gilles Deleuze (1991) and Brian Massumi (2002), have suggested, Hume's  
8 work may be more generative than Rabinow would lead us to think. I find it useful  
9 to read Hume's work as fodder for an exercise in reverse engineering. If we begin  
10 with the view of thought advocated by Rabinow (1986:234) in his chapter—as  
11 "nothing more or less than a historically locatable set of practices"—what kind of  
12 mechanism do we need to envision such that thought and the subjectivity of the  
13 thinker could both be, in Deleuze's words, "constituted in the given" (1991:104)?  
14 Whether or not we call it epistemology, a tacit understanding of how this might  
15 work weaves its way through our research in the wake of *Writing Culture*. Hume is  
16 perhaps less useful in telling us what we should think than shedding light on what  
17 we do think when we are making the most of our methods: the kinky empiricist  
18 background assumptions that structure knowledge production in our field.

19 Two of Hume's terms provide useful tools for grasping these background  
20 assumptions. The first is the notion of circumstances, which relates to the first  
21 form of reality addressed by *Writing Culture*: the one that comes into focus when  
22 one takes in the broader contexts that shape what anthropologists find in the field.  
23 Hume is famous for his account of what he calls "moral reasoning," a category that  
24 encompasses the lion's share of thought, which, with the sole exception of certain  
25 problems in mathematics, proceeds through inference (see Hume 1962, 1988; see  
26 also Deleuze 1991). Inference, for Hume, is an interpretive practice that reads the  
27 unfolding of events as signs of what once was and what is to come. Inference, like  
28 all sign use, cannot occur in a vacuum. Interpretation is an imaginative form of  
29 conduct in which what Hume calls the "fancy" moves along grooves established by  
30 previous encounters with the world. In describing the aggregated effect of these  
31 encounters, Hume draws on the notion of circumstances. Circumstances consist of  
32 the patterned distribution of happenings that makes it more or less probable that a  
33 certain person will have certain experiences. Circumstances shape the expectations  
34 that lead particular people to read a particular cause or effect off of a particular  
35 event.

36 But Hume goes further than the contributors to *Writing Culture* did in exploring  
37 how circumstances influence what people think and do. The solid ground of Hume's  
38 empiricism grows shaky when he considers the process through which experiences

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2 give rise to expectations. Hume asserts that the ability to infer is adaptive: it is the  
3 basis not only for science and technology but also for government, civil society,  
4 and domestic life. Yet he also does much to show that the practice of inference has  
5 no logical rationale. The mind-fuck moment in Hume's writings comes when he  
6 argues that the legitimacy of our inferences stands or falls on the assumption that  
7 events will have the same kind of causes and consequences in the future as they did  
8 in the past (see Hume 1988). There is no way of adducing evidence in support of  
9 this assumption because it is the assumption on which the very notion of evidence  
10 rests. (Pause. Think about it!) If we believe in the evidence of our senses, it is  
11 because of what Hume calls a "principle of human nature," "custom," which Hume  
12 describes as a quasi-organic variety of the repetition compulsion that drives us to  
13 wait for a "tock" following every "tick" (see Hume 1962; see also Deleuze 1991,  
14 1994). Unlike philosophers who draw a distinction between mind and body, Hume  
15 finds passion at the heart of reason. Rational thought draws on the same organic  
16 forces that drive hunger, lust, and the beating of hearts. Along with fellow feeling,  
17 reason is less sublime than lizard brained.

18 The same tendency both to trust experience and undermine it runs through  
19 *Writing Culture's* critique of the anthropology of its day. Something like Hume's  
20 notion of circumstances makes an appearance throughout the book. The contribu-  
21 tors' point is not that anything goes, when it comes to interpreting ethnographic  
22 data. Their point is that what does go is, to quote Paul Rabinow again, "historically  
23 locatable." Interpretations follow grooves laid in the imaginations of individuals and  
24 institutions by virtue of their pathways through space and time. Notably, interpre-  
25 tations follow grooves left by what Hume (1962) calls "artifices": technologies for  
26 regulating the imagination, which for Hume include both police forces and books.  
27 What Hume adds to this approach is the proposal that among the circumstances  
28 that matter is the form of the organism that thinks. The process of interpretation is  
29 anything but dispassionate. Thinking occurs in the body, not some isolated "internal  
30 space," and in the company of others linked together through the repetitions that  
31 constitute custom. And the process of interpretation is scarcely immune to doubt.  
32 Simply "being there" in the field cannot qualify an ethnographer to produce a trans-  
33 parent account of what he or she has witnessed. Every observation is haunted by a  
34 multiplicity of places and times. This holds for ethnographers and the ethnographers  
35 of the ethnographers, not to mention the people they study. There is no act of  
36 reasoning that is not a leap of faith, both embodied and collective. "Contextualize!"  
37 we contemporary anthropologists tell our students. "But take nothing for granted,  
38 including context," we always add.

2       The second term from Hume's repertoire that provides us with a grip on  
3 the implicit epistemology we have inherited from *Writing Culture* is sympathy (see  
4 Hume 1962, Deleuze 1991; see also Panagia 2006). Sympathy for Hume is not  
5 empathy, pity, or any of the other rosy synonyms for the ability to identify with  
6 another that we tend to associate with the word. Rather, it is the embodied outcome  
7 of proximity—occasioned by the placement of human bodies and artifacts in space  
8 and time—that leads people to share perspectives and passions. Sympathy is the  
9 outcome of inference, but with a twist. One witnesses an event—a gesture, a facial  
10 expression, an utterance—and one infers a cause, in this case the passion that led  
11 to this effect. Proximity makes the passion vivid, and one comes to feel what one  
12 imagines the other feels. The ability to share perspectives and passions, for Hume, is  
13 not simply the basis of friendship, kinship, and romance. Like inference, sympathy  
14 plays a critical role in public life. Without this passion, there would be no state, no  
15 economy, and no science. Sympathy is an embodied mode of intersubjectivity; it  
16 is the sentiment that provides the grounds of all social pursuits. Sympathy is both  
17 a source of power and compassion. It is an instrument of governance. It is also the  
18 privileged instrument of ethnography. “Be interested in what people are interested  
19 in,” we tell our students. We often add a caveat: “Don't presume that simply by  
20 seeing things their way you are necessarily doing them any good.”

21       The empirical and the ethical go hand in hand in Hume's work, as they do in  
22 *Writing Culture* and the best of contemporary anthropology. Inference and sympathy  
23 are key ingredients in every human project. They are ways of getting things done.  
24 As kinky empiricists, we would do well to follow Hume in insisting that it is not  
25 just anthropologists who engage in “moral reasoning,” as singular as our research  
26 methods might seem. So do sociologists, psychologists, economists, and political  
27 scientists, along with our more distant cousins in the natural and physical sciences.  
28 What is distinctive about anthropology among the disciplines—what makes our  
29 form of moral reasoning particularly fruitful—is the fact that we refuse to draw  
30 a categorical distinction between our practices and those of the people we study.  
31 This kind of reflexivity would risk becoming paralyzing, if it were not for an  
32 insight that Hume also offers. Even though we are aware of the partiality of our  
33 truths, we still must act. For Hume, our seemingly most rigorous ways of thinking  
34 proceeds “merely from an illusion of the imagination” (Panagia 2006:90). And yet  
35 the practical effects of “this capacity to compose fictions to both ourselves and  
36 others,” as the Canadian philosopher Davide Panagia points out, are what “saves us  
37 from the kind of nihilism Hume's radical skepticism might induce” (2006:90). As  
38 Jacques Derrida (1995, 1996) insisted, an ethical question is one that cannot be



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2 answered according to a prescription or program. Uncertainty and justice go hand  
3 in hand in those moments that force us to choose among contending ways of doing  
4 the right thing. The empiricism that characterizes anthropology at its best is both  
5 skeptical and committed. The discipline's future lives in the kinks.  
6

### 7 **LOOKING FORWARD**

8 If anthropology is going to remain a going concern, we have to learn to inhabit  
9 the ethical quandaries built into our kinky empiricism more creatively by building  
10 alliances across some of the barriers we have built around cultural anthropology. I  
11 have in mind those that divide us from policy work and the more quantitative social  
12 sciences. Counting people is not the only way to control them. When it comes  
13 to the consequences of our research, the best lives next door to the worst, as my  
14 work on sympathy and colonial state-building makes clear (see Rutherford 2009).  
15 In my investigation of the establishment of the first government post in the New  
16 Guinea highlands, I came upon an episode that stopped me in my tracks. It was in  
17 Lloyd Rhys's *Jungle Pimpernel* (1947), which describes the life and times of one  
18 of the officers whose expedition reports I poured over as part of the research for a  
19 book I am finishing. Jan Victor de Bruyn was the mixed race son of a planter, an  
20 urbane, sophisticated man with a doctorate in Javanese archeology who responded  
21 to the call of New Guinea. De Bruyn made it his mission to bring the "Stone Age"  
22 Papuans into the modern world through a carefully crafted program of colonial  
23 intervention. He was so devoted to this task that he refused to evacuate when  
24 western New Guinea fell to the Japanese at the outset of World War II. Rhys  
25 describes the wealth of ethnographic knowledge gathered by de Bruyn during his  
26 adventures running from the Japanese. De Bruyn gained an intimate acquaintance  
27 with the Papuans' distinct form of justice when a man accused of sleeping with  
28 another man's wife took shelter in the house where de Bruyn was staying. The man  
29 begged de Bruyn to save him, and de Bruyn almost succeeded, moved as he was  
30 by the dread that swept over the unfortunate man. But when the crowd set fire to  
31 the building, forcing the culprit to come out, de Bruyn picked up his camera. Rhys  
32 recounts what happened next. "When the adulterer had been shot and captured  
33 and de Bruyn could do nothing to intervene, he took the opportunity of taking an  
34 extraordinary set of photographs of the scene. Like many of his pictures they are  
35 unique. No other white man is known to have witnessed such an event, and no  
36 other photographs are known to exist" (Rhys 1947:210).

37 For de Bruyn, as for other Dutch officials in New Guinea, sympathy was a  
38 means of controlling the Papuans. And yet it created obligations—obligations born

2 of the unsettling proximity that de Bruyn had to experience to get state-building  
3 done. The fact that sympathy was an instrumental, as well as an unavoidable,  
4 element of governance in New Guinea may have made it easier for de Bruyn to put  
5 sympathy back in his toolbox when its demands proved impossible to fulfill. This is  
6 not to say that the obligations born of de Bruyn's proximity to the Papuans were not  
7 real. The abruptness with which de Bruyn turned to photography is evidence of the  
8 violence it took to turn away when he was faced with the prospect of sympathizing  
9 with the dead. However much we might want to distance ourselves from colonial  
10 figures like de Bruyn, the scenario Rhys describes should make anthropologists  
11 uncomfortable. This is not simply because there is no way fully to satisfy our  
12 obligation to others. It is also because an ethnographer and his or her subjects come  
13 from and return to different places. He or she and they come from and return  
14 to different sets of circumstances that open different opportunities, offer different  
15 constraints, and pose different demands.

16 When Jeff Schonberg picked up his camera in the research that led to *Righteous*  
17 *Dopefiend* (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009), his and Philippe Bourgois's astonishing  
18 study of homeless heroin users in San Francisco, it was not in an effort to turn his  
19 back on obligations. Like de Bruyn, Schonberg documented suffering: the dusty,  
20 trash-strewn roadside where a man crouches to inject himself, the exposed flesh  
21 left after the removal of an abscess from another man's neck; the grief on the face  
22 of another man near the coffin of a deceased friend. But Schonberg's aim was not to  
23 take a distanced view on the distress he witnessed; it was to help create a book that  
24 acts as an artifact, in Hume's sense, enlivening the passions—and expanding the  
25 imaginations—of anyone who opens its pages. The two authors' prose fulfills much  
26 the same function. The book consists of a refreshingly unapologetic combination of  
27 divergent kinds of evidence—from statistical data drawn from the public health and  
28 policy studies literatures to excerpts from field notes intimately detailing particular  
29 people's lives, loves, and torments.

30 What is remarkable about the book is its ability to track between the empirical  
31 and the ethical. The book offers a fascinating analysis of the different ways black and  
32 white heroin addicts inhabit their predicament: from their methods of injection,  
33 to their ways of getting by, to the divergent ways they stand, talk, move and react  
34 in a world that is ethnically divided. At the same time, Bourgois and Schonberg  
35 get close enough to the complicated lives of individuals to show how ethnic  
36 boundaries are crossed. Large-scale circumstances are everywhere revealed in this  
37 ethnography as shaping the narrow world that Bourgois and Schonberg describe.

38 These circumstances range from the role of race in fragmenting the labor force that

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2 existed before economic change turned this industrialized neighborhood of the city  
3 into a wasteland, to the tendency of African American extended families to retain  
4 ties to addicted relatives, to the streetwise styles of comportment available to black  
5 addicts, but not to whites, who appear to the world as pitiful, not fearsome and  
6 strong. And yet Bourgois and Schonberg's role in the narrow world created by  
7 these circumstances is anything but that of a tourist. Bourgois and Schonberg hung  
8 out with the heroin addicts. They went with them on "licks"—expeditions to steal  
9 enough resalable goods to provide for another fix. They slept in their leaky tents  
10 on cold, rainy winter nights. They lent money to the addicts; they gave them rides;  
11 they gave them photographs; they documented the stories and images the addicts  
12 wanted them to record.

13 The book stands as a tribute to particular people: Tina, Carter, Frank, Max,  
14 Petey, Scotty. And yet it opens and closes as a policy study: a book that yields  
15 specific recommendations on how Americans might deal with the problem of heroin  
16 addiction more effectively. The research Bourgois and Schonberg undertook was  
17 funded to do precisely this: to document the public health implications of different  
18 methods of injection. As much as Bourgois and Schonberg registered the effects of  
19 specifically U.S. modes of sovereignty and governmentality in the lives of those they  
20 studied, this lens does not obscure their gaze. The book ends with a bittersweet  
21 account of how the authors tried to help the individuals who populate the book  
22 escape drug addiction when their 12 years of fieldwork ended. But it also ends  
23 with a call to action to transform the circumstances that made the lives described  
24 in the book the ones the addicts had to lead. The efficacy of this appeal turns on a  
25 methodological eclecticism in which fieldwork is not the only way to illuminate a  
26 social world. It is impossible not to identify with the people Bourgois and Schonberg  
27 so generously and unflinchingly describe in their joy as well as their pain. But the  
28 book's efficacy depends on the authors' ability to step back: to pick up not just a  
29 camera, but also statistics. There is no question: the bold contentiousness called for  
30 in *Writing Culture* is absent in Bourgois and Schonberg's study. *Righteous Dopefiend's*  
31 kinky empiricism is marked by what one might hope is a different kind of bravery:  
32 the courage to build alliances with anthropology's disciplinary rivals in the social  
33 sciences but to do so on our own terms.

34 In thinking through what these terms should be, I can't help but miss the  
35 voice of Rolph Trouillot, who would have been a wonderful participant in this  
36 conversation. Twenty years ago, Trouillot told us that the time was ripe for  
37 anthropologists to contest what he called the "savage slot"—the field of inquiry  
38 that defined anthropology's place among the disciplines well before anthropology

2 even existed.<sup>6</sup> Trouillot had a far less sanguine view of the project undertaken  
3 in *Writing Culture* than I have presented here. Anthropological calls for reflexivity  
4 were “timid, spontaneous—and in this sense genuinely American—responses to  
5 major changes in relations between anthropology and the wider world, provincial  
6 expressions of wider concerns, allusions to opportunities yet to be seized” now  
7 that the “savages” were gone (Trouillot 1991:19). Today’s anthropologists have in  
8 many ways seized these opportunities and undertaken the “fundamental redirection”  
9 Trouillot demanded. There has been no shortage of anthropologists seeking “new  
10 points of reentry by questioning the symbolic world upon which ‘nativeness’ is  
11 presumed” (Trouillot 1991:40). This is no shortage of anthropologists “claiming  
12 new grounds” (Trouillot 1991:36).<sup>7</sup> But even as we engage in research that is  
13 creating new contact zones among the social sciences, we still have yet to develop  
14 compelling ways of describing what anthropologists can—and can’t—do better  
15 than economists, psychologists, or political scientists. The time is still ripe for what  
16 Trouillot called for: “an epistemology and semiology of all anthropology has done  
17 and can do.”

18 Kinky empiricism: those who embrace it are attuned to the real world effects  
19 of their own practices and the texts that they put into the world. They are aware  
20 of the analytic and ethical twists and turns born of a research method that forces  
21 them to get close enough to imagine how it might feel to walk in another’s shoes.  
22 They are not afraid of dangerous liaisons. *Writing Culture* was not a detour on the  
23 way to the projects undertaken by today’s anthropologists. In all its kinkiness, this  
24 book pointed the way.

#### 25 **ABSTRACT**

26 *In this article, which takes James Clifford and George Marcus’s Writing Culture as its*  
27 *starting point, I make the case for a kinky kind of empiricism that builds on the singular*  
28 *power of anthropological ways of knowing the world. Kinky empiricism takes established*  
29 *forms to an extreme and turns back to reflect on its own conditions of possibility. At*  
30 *the same time, it deploys methods that create obligations, obligations that compel those*  
31 *who seek knowledge to put themselves on the line by making truth claims that they*  
32 *know will intervene within the settings and among the people they describe. I begin to*  
33 *make this argument by way of a close rereading of moments in Writing Culture. I then*  
34 *turn to David Hume’s writings on empiricism, which, I suggest, offer the ingredients*  
35 *for an empiricism that is both skeptical and ethical because it includes among its*  
36 *objects of inquiry the apparatuses through which reality is known. I end by exploring*  
37 *dangers and possibilities associated with kinky empiricism by juxtaposing a moment*  
38 *from my research on state building in Dutch New Guinea with the approach taken in*

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2 *Philippe Bourgois and Jeffrey Schonberg's groundbreaking study, Righteous Dopefiend.*  
3 *In rereading Writing Culture, I find the ingredients of a more affirmative stance toward*  
4 *anthropology than is usually associated with Writing Culture—one premised on the*  
5 *need for what Michel-Rolph Trouillot once called “an epistemology and semiology of*  
6 *all anthropologists have done and can do.” [empiricism, anthropology, methods,*  
7 *ethics, Dutch New Guinea United States]*

### 9 NOTES

- 10 1. Siegel developed themes from this course in his brilliant study of Indonesian nationalism, *Fetish,*  
11 *Recognition, Revolution* (1997).
- 12 2. Clifford and others of the time drew on Bakhtin (1981) for their notion of dialogue. Read by way  
13 of Jakobson, Peirce, Goffman, Derrida, and others, Bakhtin's ideas about dialogue and voicing  
14 also run through much of the work cited above.
- 15 3. See Siegel 1997 on this predicament.
- 16 4. See, for example, Sangren 1988. Clifford 1986a also points to the diversity of the chapters and  
17 eschews any effort to reduce them to a single project.
- 18 5. In his introduction to *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Richard H. Popkin reports that Hume  
19 told Adam Smith that “the only reason he wanted to stay alive was to ‘see the elimination of  
20 this strange superstition, Christianity, that pervaded the world.’ Then, in his usual skeptical  
21 manner, Hume added that even if he could carry on his efforts in this direction, he doubted that  
22 Christianity would ever be eliminated.” See Hume 1980.
- 23 6. Trouillot traced this slot to a *thématique* born during the Renaissance, when the savage became  
24 an element in the trilogy, along with order and utopia, that oriented the political and conceptual  
25 moves through what we now take as the West came into being (1991:18). Whether or not  
26 representations of the newly discovered “other” had any empirical reality is beside the point,  
27 Trouillot tells us: “The savage is only evidence in a debate, the importance of which surpasses  
28 not only his understanding but also his very existence” (1991:33).
- 29 7. To make a case for the advantages of the kind of knowledge anthropology produces is anything  
30 but to invoke what Trouillot refers to as the “ahistorical voice of reason, justice, or civilization”  
31 (1991:19). It is to acknowledge anthropology's own situated standing as a science among other  
32 sciences—to specify what we can do—and can't do—better than economists, political scientists,  
33 or psychologists. We have to learn to think about anthropology within a wider landscape of  
34 knowledge production and political action. Patting ourselves on the back from our studies of the  
35 state, say, is misguided if we fail to contend with changes in the discipline of political science.  
36 The other way of reading our ability to claim new ground is in terms of political science's retreat  
37 from the historical specificity associated with comparative politics. The motto would seem to  
38 be “let the girls do it”—that is, leave this kind of empirical work to the relatively feminized  
discipline of anthropology. The boys with their elegant rational choice models remain nestled  
in the armpits of power. To become something other than specialists in savagery, we need to  
find new ways to authorize our findings as something other than the musings of adventurers  
seeking the exotic close to home. Trouillot calls on anthropology to intervene more effectively  
in debates over the Western canon by championing minority voices. This challenge remains,  
but these days there are also other interdisciplinary fish to fry.

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