

## Foregrounding the Subjective in Leiris, Lévi-Strauss, and Malinowski

*Leiris, Lévi-Strauss ve Malinowski'de  
Öznelliğin Ön plana Çekilmesi*

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### Abstract

This essay is concerned with the ways in which aspects of anthropology's historical struggle with subjectivity and language, as explored by Clifford Geertz in *Works and Lives*, is mirrored in revealing ways in Michel Leiris' approach to his singular autobiographical project, *The Rules of the Game*. While conventional wisdom suggests that anthropology and autobiography have little in common, I aim to make clear how the role of author-subjectivity in Leiris is foregrounded in much the same way Lévi-Strauss does in *Tristes Tropiques*. The essay's second part studies how Bronisław Malinowski's corpus reveals a similar dynamic. I aim to show how such a foregrounding of subjectivity, rather than obscuring the objects or subjects of study, is a means of getting closer to them.

### Anahtar Kelimeler

Autobiography, subjectivity, anthropology, Leiris, Lévi-Strauss, Malinowski

### Öz

Bu makale, Clifford Geertz'in *Eserler ve Hayatlar* (Works and Lives) adlı kitabında ele aldığı antropolojinin öznellik ve dille olan tarihsel mücadelesinin Michel Leiris'in tek otobiyografik projesi olan *Oyunun Kuralları*'da (The Rules of the Game) sergilediği yaklaşımda nasıl örneklendiği ile ilgilidir. Genel kanı antropoloji ve otobiyografinin çok az ortak noktası olduğunu öne sürse de, Lévi-Strauss'un *Tristes Tropiques*'te yaptığı gibi Leiris'te de yazar-öznellik rolünün nasıl ön plana çıkarıldığını açıklığa kavuşturmayı hedefliyorum. Makalenin ikinci bölümü Bronisław Malinowski'nin külliyatının benzer bir dinamiği nasıl ortaya koyduğunu inceliyor. Özelliğin bu şekilde ön plana çıkarılmasının, çalışma nesnelerini veya öznelerini gizlemekten ziyade, onlara yaklaşmanın bir yolu olduğunu göstermeyi amaçlıyorum.

### Keywords

Otobiyografi, öznellik, antropoloji, Leiris, Lévi-Strauss, Malinowski

## Introduction

In the 1980s, the field of anthropology was facing a methodological identity crisis. A recently-published spate of texts had foregrounded the subjective and literary dimensions of its craft, which had long been held as ancillary to its status as a social science. Among these texts were George Marcus and Michael Fischer's *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* (1986), Marcus and James Clifford's *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (1986), and Clifford's follow-up text, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature and Art* (1988). Clifford's *Writing Culture* was of particular note in its critique of traditional views of anthropology, which was seen by some to threaten the field's "old disciplinary principles of truth, science, and objectivity with the relativizing epistemic murk of newfangled literary theory and other dubious influences."<sup>1</sup>

The field was thus facing "a sort of epistemological hypochondria," as many anthropologists felt that their work had been stripped of the epistemic certainty it had previously enjoyed.<sup>2</sup> Other critics, however, felt that such reactions were "rather exaggerated anxieties," among whom was Clifford Geertz.<sup>3</sup> In *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author* (1989), Geertz argued that anthropology would more than survive its present struggles if it properly acknowledged and reckoned with the real issues presented by its critics.<sup>4</sup> More than this, Geertz argued that the field's most influential practitioners had earned their reputations not due to the scientific purity of their works but to the effective use of their subjective perspectives, narration, and description. Among the figures Geertz analyzes along these lines are Claude Lévi-Strauss, Bronisław Malinowski, and Evan Evans-Pritchard.<sup>5</sup>

Geertz thus took what anthropologists feared was their field's Achilles heel and framed it as one of its most enduring strengths. Geertz argued that it was through the embrace of subjective experience that the most authentic anthropological work is done—that, rather than objective

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<sup>1</sup> Orin Starn, "Writing Culture At 25: Special Editor's Introduction," *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 27, no. 3 (2012): 411.

<sup>2</sup> Clifford Geertz, *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), 71.

<sup>3</sup> Geertz, *Works and Lives*, 9. Several examples of contemporary anthropology and autoethnography came to affirm Geertz' view that the personal voice was a strength, rather than a weakness. Ruth Behar's *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology that Breaks Your Heart* (Beacon Press, 1997) is an excellent example.

<sup>4</sup> Geertz, *Works and Lives*, 149.

<sup>5</sup> Evans-Pritchard's general outlook and famous contention that anthropology was more a discipline of the humanities rather than a science is relevant to this discussion. For the sake of brevity, however, analysis of his work and perspectives will be omitted here.

distance and detachment, it was in the first-person point-of-view that many of anthropology's most important works were forged. One of the most evocative examples of this was Lévi-Strauss' inimitable *Tristes Tropiques* (1955). Rather than hide the exigencies of his experience as an anthropologist in the field, Lévi-Strauss foregrounded them. His experiences, his distastes, his discomforts were not hidden or papered over by a professionalism or decorum or scientific verbiage. They were key components of the work's ethos and a central reason why it became a modern classic.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, disciplines other than anthropology also wrestled with what to make of the influences of subjectivity. In the humanities, history had a public grappling with such issues, as the work of Hayden White powerfully illustrates, as did the sciences, as seen in the work of Bruno Latour and Thomas Nagel. This essay, however, is motivated by some of the unexpected affinities in the ways in which anthropology and autobiography responded to the difficulties of subjectivity. Attention will be given to Michel Leiris, whose writings blur the lines traditionally distinguishing between autobiography and anthropology. As illustrated in his ethnographic work *Phantom Africa* and his later series of autobiographical writings, *The Rules of the Game*, Leiris' writings anticipated and preemptively responded to the challenges anthropology faced later in the twentieth century. Connections are then drawn between Leiris' "treatment" of subjective perspectives and similar perspectives in evidence in the writings of Claude Lévi-Strauss, namely, *Tristes Tropiques*. The final part of the essay deals with the event and impact of the publication of Bronisław Malinowski's *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term* with attention given to the ways it not only reframed how Malinowski's classic text *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* was interpreted, but how it occasioned a reformed awareness of the subjectivity of the fieldworker in the discipline. The close readings and analyses that follow concern the authors' awareness and treatment of the subjective mechanics of writing and representation, both of the self and of the other. In each, there is a shift—for some intentional, others not—from a writerly position in which such subjective mechanics are hidden, to a position in which they are exposed. The essay then offers some brief reflections on the rhetorical effects of such foregrounding, arguing that by so doing, authors and readers arrive at an even playing field on which the power to determine and define is a mutual, shared enterprise.

### Leiris and Lévi-Strauss: Foregrounding the Subject

Leiris was a highly idiosyncratic figure whose variegated literary and disciplinary associations linked him to a wide range of influences and experiences. In the 1920s, Leiris was involved with the Surrealist movement, whose emphasis on free expression and the exploration of the self and experience had attracted the young author. Though he achieved some success with his poetry in these early years, by 1929, Leiris had had a falling out with Andre Breton and was looking to move in a different direction. This new direction came in the form of an invitation from the anthropologist Marcel Griaule to serve as a secretary-archivist on France's first ethnological

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mission to sub-Saharan Africa. In Leiris' mind, Griaule's invitation was an opportunity to experience something fresh and inject something new into his life, which he felt had grown stale and weighed down by a stalwart depression. Deciding to accompany the expedition was an effort for Leiris to find and don "a new skin," a new way of being.<sup>6</sup>

The Africa that awaited Leiris, however, was different from the one he had nursed in his mind. Leiris' desire had been to escape Europe, to escape himself, through immersion in a cultural world far from the aesthetic movements, political dramas, and "civilized" mentalities that had lately suffocated him. The logistics of travel, however, proved alternately dreary and exasperating for Leiris: cars breaking down, the effort to find palatable and agreeable foods, illness, shoes falling apart, receiving haircuts whenever possible, combating mosquitoes, achieving a good night's rest. In addition to these challenges were even more formidable ones: disagreeable dynamics within the crew of the expedition (Leiris's distaste for Griaule, with whom he later had a falling out) and the principal challenge of acquiring an authentic understanding of their anthropological subjects.

Such struggles were vividly documented in the daily journal Leiris kept while on the expedition, which was published soon after his return to Europe as *L'Afrique fantôme* (1934 [English translation, *Phantom Africa*, 2017]). The text was renowned for its idiosyncrasy as an ethnographic work. Far from conventional ethnographical writing, Leiris' text was an enthralling admixture of personal reflections, anxieties, self-doubts, sexual fantasies, and genuine, substantive ethnographic observation. It also documented Leiris' disappointing realization that ethnological experience would not free him of what he'd hoped to leave in Europe: "The voyage only alters us for brief moments," he wrote in February 1932, "Most of the time, you remain sadly as you've always been."<sup>7</sup>

While the experience may not have been what he hoped for it to be, Leiris did not come away totally empty-handed, for it was through this experience that Leiris acquired the habit of notecard-taking. The daily entries in *Phantom Africa* are instances of this method of jotting down short details and observations with little effort to paper over the seams of starts and stops. Though originally a method of documentation in an ethnological setting, it later became a foundational method used in virtually all of Leiris' writings, ethnological or not. After his return to Europe, Leiris stated that "Everything that occurred to me from day to day that deserved interest, I would write down on a note card (perhaps an ethnographer's habit)."<sup>8</sup> As such, what began as an ethnographer's habit became an autobiographer's habit. In composing *The Rules of the Game*, Leiris used his notecards as springboards for reflection, as guideposts for wending his way through

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<sup>6</sup> Phyllis Clarck-Taoua, "In Search of New Skin: Michel Leiris's *L'Afrique fantôme*," *Cahiers d'études africaines* (2002): 167, <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesafraicaines/153>.

<sup>7</sup> Michel Leiris, *Phantom Africa*, trans. Brent Hayes Edwards (New York: Seagull Books, 2017), 281.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Jann Purdy, "Ethnographic Devices in Modern French Autobiography," *Pacific Coast Philology*, vol. 42, no. 1 (2007): 27.

the labyrinths of memory and verbal associations.<sup>9</sup> So important were the notecards that Denis Hollier included them as an appendix to the 2003 Pléiade edition of *La Règle du jeu*.<sup>10</sup>

The adoption of the notetaking system marked an important shift in Leiris' writing in more than one regard, however. Something had crystallized as a result of his experience on the expedition related to the difficulties he experienced in attempting to authentically grasp and represent the African other. Several entries reflected on these challenges, the result of which was a waning confidence of ever arriving at a clear understanding. For example, on 13 October 1931 Leiris wrote, "At each stage in each inquiry, a new door opens, usually onto what seems an abyss or a quagmire. Each gap is bridged, however. Perhaps we will find our way through?"<sup>11</sup> A few days before this entry, however, the dubiousness in Leiris' voice here was magnified into something much more menacing. Leiris had "Dreamed all night of totemic complications and familial structures, without being able to defend myself against this labyrinth of streets, rocks, and forbidden places."<sup>12</sup> Here, the ambiguities of fieldwork assume the air of a personal affront or threat, suggesting that Leiris' investigations are, for him, much more than mere intellectual curiosity or academic exercise; they correlate to a kind of searching that is much closer to home, so to speak. This is illustrated in another passage in which Leiris' choice of words conspicuously aligns with the titles of what would later be the volumes of his autobiography. On 5 October 1931, Leiris wrote, "I despair of ever being able to get to the bottom of anything. Merely to have bits and scraps of information concerning so many things infuriates me..."<sup>13</sup> These "bits and scraps of information" disturb the Leiris who, at this point in 1931, still had hope that he could eventually "get to the bottom" of a matter. It appears, however, that Leiris soon came to view such bits and scraps of information not as breadcrumbs on the way to foundations or principles, but the principles—or if the reader will forgive a pun, the *rules*—themselves. One may reasonably assume that Leiris' notecards themselves were seen by him as these bits and scraps of information, the whole of which may never be seen or arrived at.

Leiris' dawning understanding of the eminence, if we may call it such, of "bits and scraps of information" was part and parcel to a growing skepticism toward conventional understandings of authority that can be observed in *Phantom Africa*. However confounding Leiris may have found the African other, it did not imply that his fellow countrymen were any more a source of comfort or familiarity. To the contrary, Leiris openly expressed his antipathy for Paris, his country, the European life he left behind. Whenever the behavior of his fellow explorers reflected colonial mindsets, Leiris made no effort to conceal his disapproval. This disapproval grew over time, and

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<sup>9</sup> Marc Blanchard, "Visions of the Archipelago: Michel Leiris, Autobiography and Ethnographic Memory," *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 5, no. 3 (Aug., 1990), 271.

<sup>10</sup> Denis Hollier, "Notes (on the Index Card)," *October*, vol. 112, (Spring, 2005): 35.

<sup>11</sup> Leiris, *Phantom Africa*, 189.

<sup>12</sup> Leiris, *Phantom Africa*, 187.

<sup>13</sup> Leiris, *Phantom Africa*, 183, emphasis mine.

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by 26 January 1932, Leiris wrote, “I am less and less able to stand the idea of colonization.”<sup>14</sup> Leiris viewed colonization as a bloody, demeaning means of extracting taxes from the colonies. And in the same entry, Leiris candidly linked this extractive motive to the endeavors of his own field: “Ethnographic study, to what end? To be able to carry out a policy better able to bring in taxes.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, Leiris viewed ethnography as an arm or organ of the colonialist project which sought to better understand non-European cultures so that colonial rule could operate more efficiently.

The disparity between the ostensible aims of colonialism and ethnography and what in Leiris’ view were their actual aims left an indelible mark on Leiris. Because he could not endorse the project of colonialism, and because colonization and ethnology were different parts of the same project, neither could Leiris endorse the conventions of ethnographic documentation, which presumed a kind of authority over its subjects in the same way European colonialism did. Leiris’ use of the notecard method, as such, could be seen as a kind of rhetorical protest against colonial modes of authority. Because he did not want to claim (or felt that he *could* not claim) to be an authority on his ethnographic subjects, he employed a mode of representation that was unsystematic, non-totalizing, and foregrounded his struggles to determine or define what he encountered.

Along these lines, Leiris includes a telling conversation with his colleague, André Schaeffner, in the entry marked for 28 December 1931. That afternoon they had a “literary discussion...concerning the interest of private diaries in general and of this diary in particular. He dismisses their interest; I defend it, of course.”<sup>16</sup> Then, in a rare explicit statement of a kind of methodology, Leiris wrote, “Should one tell all? Should one select? Should one transfigure things? I am of the opinion that one should describe everything.”<sup>17</sup> This method of “describing everything” thus included, based on Leiris’ writings, not only the objects and subjects being observed, but the observer himself, complete with his days of bad moods, frustrations, hopes, and longings. By implication, writing that indicated an awareness of what was only outwardly-oriented was therefore incomplete; giving account of everything, on this basis, must include an inward awareness as well. To deliberately omit descriptions of the observer doing the observing, therefore—as was the *de facto* *modus operandi* of conventional ethnography of the time—was to be party to the attitude of authority over the observed in the manner that Leiris found increasingly problematic. To rhetorically combat such attitudes, Leiris turned a spotlight on the subjective mechanisms of writing and representation.

Leiris did not, however, relegate the problem of authority to the domains of colonialism and ethnography. For him, all manner of representation confronted the problem of authority, including autobiography. Autobiography encountered abysses and quagmires similar to those he encountered

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<sup>14</sup> Leiris, *Phantom Africa*, 267.

<sup>15</sup> Leiris, *Phantom Africa*, 267.

<sup>16</sup> Leiris, *Phantom Africa*, 242.

<sup>17</sup> Leiris, *Phantom Africa*, 242.

in the field. The way reaching the bottom of things eluded him in his fieldwork was mirrored in his attempts at self-understanding that *The Rules of the Game* document. In a manner distinctly similar to the ways Leiris foregrounded his frustrated attempts to make sense of the African societies he came in contact with, Leiris, in *The Rules of the Game*, again turned a spotlight not just on the “scraps” of memories jotted down onto notecards, but on himself in the process of making sense of those scraps.

For example, in the second volume of *The Rules of the Game, Scraps* (1955), we find Leiris unsure about what to make of a notecard he had written years before. On the card, Leiris had written that sex and death were somehow wrapped up with one another. In processing what he must have been thinking all those years before, Leiris hypothesized that the “instinctive hatred of the sexes” must come from a foggy awareness that “their mortality [was] due to the differentiation between them.”<sup>18</sup> Leiris struggled, however, to “classify the lines in question” and wondered “aloud” on the page whether he should view it merely as “a document relating to my state of mind [at the time],” or whether to take it as something more generally true.<sup>19</sup>

Leiris’ decision to foreground his struggle to make sense of his notecard is emblematic of his approach to memory generally. Whereas more conventional autobiographies set out to tell “the” story of a life or organize memories according to a theme or narrative, Leiris does no such thing. The “scratches” and “scraps” of his autobiographical writings cannot be so unified, claiming authority neither over the Leiris of his memories, nor the Leiris writing about his past self. Leiris depicted himself struggling, vacillating, wavering, unsure of what to say of and for himself. Leiris thus invites the reader to view and consider the seams and self-doubts that are inherent components of the writing process, but which other writers and autobiographers often endeavor to conceal. For Leiris, to conceal such seams would be to claim an authority over himself to which he felt he had no more right than he did over the people and societies encountered in *Phantom Africa*.

Leiris’ choice to foreground messy acts of giving form to “raw” information, unique as it is, is paralleled in the works of several other anthropologists, but perhaps none more so than in Claude Lévi-Strauss’ seminal work, *Tristes Tropiques* (1955). Like *The Rules of the Game*, *Tristes Tropiques* was composed as a sort of corrective to what Lévi-Strauss saw as wanting or problematic in anthropological writing of his time. Lévi-Strauss pushed against conventional anthropology’s assumption that the following sequence of events could occur without issue: an authentic encounter with an object of perception/interest, followed by a faithful representation of that encounter. Conventional anthropology had had an implicit faith in its ability to understand what and who the cultural other was in addition to an untested faith in its ability to express those findings with fidelity. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, anthropologists conducted their work as if they were “looking through a crystal window to the reality beyond.”<sup>20</sup> Belief in

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<sup>18</sup> Michel Leiris, *The Rules of the Game: Volume 2: Scraps*, trans. Lydia Davis (New Haven, MA: Yale University Press, 2017), 59.

<sup>19</sup> Leiris, *The Rules of the Game*, 60.

<sup>20</sup> Geertz, *Works and Lives*, 29.



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such unclouded perception was contiguous with the modes of writing that Leiris' work aimed at countering, modes that sought to conceal "the construction scars [and] the brush marks."<sup>21</sup> In contrast to these features (what Bourdieu might call anthropology's *habitus*), Lévi-Strauss sought to guide his readers' attention to his subjectivity, to the subjective scars, brush strokes, and mechanics involved in the construction of his text. As Geertz formulated it, Lévi-Strauss did not want his reader to "look through his text, he [wanted] him to look at it."<sup>22</sup> The manner in which Lévi-Strauss did this was on striking display in *Tristes Tropiques*' infamous opening line: "I hate travelling and explorers."<sup>23</sup>

In the opening line's crosshairs was anthropological writing that smacked of travel literature and gloried in the ethnographer's burdens (the grueling travel, the living conditions, the food, etc.), features which Lévi-Strauss viewed as mere congratulatory self-aggrandizement. But the opening line is also an instance of Lévi-Strauss forcing his readers to look at the ethnographer executing his tasks rather than exclusively at the results of his efforts. As Leiris did in *The Rules of the Game*, Lévi-Strauss chose to open his work not with an introduction, or a scene-setting, or with remarks on method; instead, he drew the reader's attention to an idiosyncratic opinion of the ethnographer himself. Lévi-Strauss' brusque, antipathetic pronouncement was *Tristes Tropiques*' tempo-setting salvo.

By no means, however, did the text deride the overall worth of the anthropological project. Lévi-Strauss engaged in what qualifies as conventional anthropological work throughout. But the foregrounding of the subjectivity of the ethnographer, himself, was a conspicuous—and memorable—departure from the traditional approach. In such choices, Lévi-Strauss and Leiris can be observed making parallel gestures, the aims of which were to move toward greater authenticity in the representation of others and of oneself. Leiris did not abandon autobiography because of the fraught nature of decoding his notecards in the same way that Lévi-Strauss did not abandon anthropology because of a similarly fraught "chaos of facts."<sup>24</sup> Both sought to draw the reader's attention to the processes involved in the documenting and writing of their fields. By so doing, Leiris and Lévi-Strauss introduced a level of accountability that was largely absent in anthropological literature before them. And though the old variety of authority may have been lost, an arguably more engaging kind of authenticity was achieved in its stead.

Geertz' analysis of Lévi-Strauss and *Tristes Tropiques* revealed another alignment with Leiris. Geertz suggested that because of *Tristes Tropiques*' unique characteristics, it could be read as an example of a variety of genres, one of which was as a symbolist text—a movement with which, by way of his previous alignment with Surrealism, Leiris was also associated. Geertz

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<sup>21</sup> Geertz, *Works and Lives*, 29.

<sup>22</sup> Geertz, *Works and Lives*, 29, emphasis mine.

<sup>23</sup> Geertz, *Works and Lives*, 17.

<sup>24</sup> Malinowski's term from the oft-quoted passage in "Baloma; the Spirits of the Dead in the Trobriand Islands," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, vol. 46 (1916), 211–212.

argued that the manner in which Lévi-Strauss grappled with memory resembled the symbolist tradition's treatment of memory. For example, at one point, Lévi-Strauss realized that the "unconscious awareness" of the association in his mind of Brazil with an "all-permeating sense of burning perfume" must have been due to the assonance between *Brésil* and *grésiller*.<sup>25</sup> Once again, Lévi-Strauss and Leiris were of a piece in this subtle form of self-analysis. Gaining awareness of this simple association in Lévi-Strauss' mind revealed to him that "[exploration] is not so much a matter of covering ground as of *digging beneath the surface*," that "chance fragments of landscape, momentary snatches of life, reflections caught on the wing—such are the things that alone make it possible for us to understand and interpret horizons which would otherwise have nothing to offer us."<sup>26</sup> These "chance fragments" and "momentary snatches of life"—which allude to the character of Leiris' notecards—bypassed the ways in which self-conscious performativity can distort what lies beneath the surface. The unperformed, pretense-less nature of these ephemeral moments shielded them from the inauthenticity of outward display, and thus secured the value they had for Lévi-Strauss.

The autobiographical and ethnographical projects of Leiris and Lévi-Strauss converge once again in their shared desire to be free of performativity as such, whether it was the self performing for the other, as in autobiography, or the other performing for the self, as in ethnography. Leiris and Lévi-Strauss showed how "small" details and interior moments could reveal "primitive" states of being that might otherwise be obscured by the masks of public performance, pressures to conform to conventions, and needs to satisfy tradition. The allure of "primitive" states, for Lévi-Strauss and Leiris, was also wrapped up with the prospect of retrieving something that "developed" European cultures could not offer: for Leiris, a deeper self-understanding and of deliverance from his existential malaise, for Lévi-Strauss, deeper anthropological understanding.

The final affinity between Lévi-Strauss and Leiris I would like to mention is a mutual skepticism about the extent to which personal experience was relevant to the lives of others and to external reality. Personal experience was, for Lévi-Strauss, not entirely devoid of meaning unto itself, but he believed that it needed to be filtered through a kind of framework for it to rise above the status of the anecdotal. In a passage tracing his intellectual development in *Tristes Tropiques*, Lévi-Strauss explained how his interactions with Freud, Hegel, and Marx had impressed upon him the importance of one principle above all others: the idea "that understanding consists in reducing one type of reality to another."<sup>27</sup> The central challenge of this principle was, for Lévi-Strauss, "the problem of the relationship between feeling and reason"—things in seeming opposition to each

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<sup>25</sup> Geertz, *Works and Lives*, 43.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted on Geertz, *Works and Lives*, 43 (emphasis mine). This section's discussion has many affinities with Kathleen Stewart's *Ordinary Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), which analyzes intimate emotions and experiences in light of the complex economic, political, and social matrices of the external world.

<sup>27</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, trans. John Weightman and Doreen Weightman (New York: Penguin Classics, 2012), 57.

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other, but in possession of equal value. Lévi-Strauss had hoped for a kind of “superrationalism” whereby not one of either’s properties would be sacrificed in the process of reducing one type of reality to another.<sup>28</sup>

Because this principle was central to Lévi-Strauss’ philosophical worldview, he found the tenets of “new metaphysical tendencies” like phenomenology highly problematic. Phenomenology’s suggestion of a continuity between experience and reality was objectionable to Lévi-Strauss not because it reduced the one to the other, but because it neglected the need to subject experience to an “objective synthesis,” a kind of synthesis wholly devoid of sentimentality.<sup>29</sup> Perspectives like phenomenology’s were, as such, problematic to Lévi-Strauss because of the “over-indulgent attitude towards the illusions of subjectivity” he saw in them.<sup>30</sup>

Though these statements may appear to contradict the foregoing characterization of Lévi-Strauss’ relationship to subjectivity, the understanding of subjectivity that Lévi-Strauss practiced aligned with what he spells out in theory here: that subjectivity itself is not itself the issue, but one’s relationship to it. Lévi-Strauss held that subjecting personal experience to a system was the key to properly perceiving it and was the means by which it could connect to and comment on reality. Following the methods of his “sources of inspiration” (Hegel, Marx, Freud), Lévi-Strauss developed a system by which individual experience could connect to broader reality, which was, in a word, structuralism. It was only through an “objective synthesis” of this kind that individual experience could be transformed into something that, for him, drew the individual closer to, not farther from, reality. Drawing closer to that reality required the “use” of subjectivity as a means, not an end: “[Our] mission...is to understand Being in relation to itself, and not in relation to oneself.”<sup>31</sup> Insofar as it was wrapped up in individual feeling, Lévi-Strauss viewed subjectivity as a hindrance to an understanding of reality and of Being. But insofar as it reflected features of Being *eo ipso*, it was crucially important.

Lévi-Strauss’ conception of subjectivity was thus fundamentally interpersonal. His engagement of subjective experience in *Tristes Tropiques* was motivated not just by an interest in his own experience but by an interest in what his experience told of what was *not* his—of what extended beyond the limits of his experience. In the passage from *Scraps* discussed above, Leiris’ self-analysis also reflected this perspective as he pondered whether his thoughts were anything more than mere personal idiosyncrasy. Leiris determined that there was a relationship between his individual experience and others’, but was careful to not extrapolate too far, stating that in “[deriving] a representation of reality essentially from my own experience or from my own feelings and having formulated it as a primary truth that was not only my truth but also everyone’s truth [he may have] done something rather ill considered.”<sup>32</sup> Such apprehensions notwithstanding, Leiris

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<sup>28</sup> Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, 57.

<sup>29</sup> Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, 58.

<sup>30</sup> Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, 58.

<sup>31</sup> Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, 58; Russell translation quoted on Geertz, *Works and Lives*, 46.

<sup>32</sup> Leiris, *The Rules of the Game*, 61.

later affirmed that one of “the most natural aims of literary activity [was the forging of] certain approximate truths which people will accept as their own.”<sup>33</sup> Leiris thus ultimately asserted a relationship to his individual experience that aligned closely with Lévi-Strauss’ contention that such can represent a reality extending beyond the limits of the self.

A few, final distinctions between the authors’ positions are worth underlining, however. Firstly, it seems that for Leiris, unlike Lévi-Strauss, feeling (or sentiment) was not an impediment to understanding. Feeling, for Leiris, seemed to be the very medium by which interpersonal understanding was established. One might envision that whereas Lévi-Strauss reached upward, seeking de-personalized and thereby objective understanding, Leiris planted his feet on the ground all the more deliberately, holding that it was only through concrete experience that he could transcend it. Secondly, in part as a result of this, Leiris seemed to be more optimistic about interpersonal understanding. Personal experience for him did not need to be passed through an objectifying synthesis in order to secure a relationship with external reality. It seems that Leiris felt the very process of communication (the act of writing, particularly) conducted by the individual possessed of itself the power to touch reality, to speak to the experiences of others, and to thereby transcend individual experience. Leiris recognized how this perspective could be “ill considered,” speaking to the “relativity” and the “dubiousness” inherent in his suggestion, but he nevertheless felt that individual reflections could possess “some general truth” and that one could “extract something worthwhile” from one’s scraps of experience.<sup>34</sup> Such reflections reached outward, away from the self, in a manner similar, once again, to Lévi-Strauss’ belief that individual experience should be mined for what is not singular in it, but for what is general.

### Malinowski Before and Behind the Curtain

I would like to leave Lévi-Strauss and Leiris at this point and turn in this final section to Bronisław Malinowski, another imposing figure in twentieth-century anthropology. Geertz devoted a chapter in *Works and Lives* to Malinowski, “I-Witnessing,” in which he reiterated how as a social science, anthropology was constitutionally averse to the influence the author-individual could have on its work, especially in light of the stressors of fieldwork. He notes how the anthropologist had been expected to abscond from the comfortable confines of cultural familiarity to live in the context of the cultural other and act as a dispassionate, transparent eye on the host culture all the while. These expectations were largely the result of the precedent that was set by Malinowski and his foundational work, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922).

Malinowski’s method of total-immersion was the standard in the field for decades, but eventually gave rise to an enduring paradox. On the one hand, the anthropologist had been

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<sup>33</sup> Leiris, *The Rules of the Game*, 61.

<sup>34</sup> Leiris, *The Rules of the Game*, 61, 60.

expected, as Geertz phrased it, to “[insinuate] himself into practically any situation, as to be able to see as savages see, think as savages think, speak as savages speak, and on occasion even feel as they feel and believe as they believe.”<sup>35</sup> On the other hand, the anthropologist was also expected to be a paragon of scientific objectivity, to go about their work in a “rigorously objective, dispassionate, thorough, exact, and disciplined” manner.<sup>36</sup> Such expectations were, to use Geertz’s phrase, “uneasily yoked” (to put it mildly). Yet, for a considerable amount of time in anthropological practice, they were obligatory bedfellows in the anthropologist’s world. Such expectations were fraught with more fundamental problems to boot—like, for example, whether the anthropologist ever could “fully insinuate” herself into another culture. The reality was that the anthropologist only remained in the field for as long as disposition and circumstance allowed, which necessarily implies that all anthropological data and details are truncated and selective by necessity. Furthermore, the anthropologist’s purpose of being in the field to begin with was in order to describe (that is, *publish*) their findings to their home audience. In order for this to occur, the visitation must by necessity come to an end at some arbitrarily determined juncture.

Anthropological writing, as such, is reflective of the anthropologist’s selective pivot into the role of social-scientific commentator. At the writing stage, she is no longer immersed in the cultural life being studied. She has stepped out of the lived-experience and must now determine how best to translate observations into literary form. The shift from lived-experience to reflective and articulated expression, which generally indicates a shift from a subjective to an objective vantage-point, is tectonic. The translation of the “chaos of facts” into a literary product is to transform the literal into the figurative, the formless into the formed. Given anthropology’s aspiration of performing as a science, such transitions and translations are fraught negotiations.

By way of unlocking this tension in Malinowski’s work, Geertz analyzes *Argonauts* alongside an excerpt from Malinowski’s controversial, posthumously published *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term*. Laying fallow in his corpus of unpublished works for years, Malinowski’s *Diary* was published at the behest of his widow in 1967—some 25 years after his death. The text had been composed during the years of the First World War when Malinowski was living with the Trobrianders of New Guinea, collecting the primary material for what became *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. When the *Diary* was originally published, it sent shockwaves through the anthropological community because the Malinowski it presented was entirely different from the one presented in *Argonauts*. Whereas the Malinowski of *Argonauts* was depicted as the preeminent anthropologist—called by James George Frazer “a quintessential man of science”<sup>37</sup>—the Malinowski of the *Diary* pulled the curtain back to reveal a man who Geertz scathingly referred

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<sup>35</sup> Geertz, *Works and Lives*, 79.

<sup>36</sup> Geertz, *Works and Lives*, 79.

<sup>37</sup> Geertz, *Works and Lives*, 80.

to as a “self-preoccupied, hypochondriacal narcissist, whose fellow-feeling for the people he lived with was limited in the extreme.”<sup>38</sup>

A few examples will help illustrate the contrast the *Diary* set up. In reading the *Diary*, one sees that Malinowski the man is frequently disturbed, disenchanted, and irritable. Turning to the entry for Christmas Eve, 1917, for example, we see all such affects and more. Malinowski writes about going on a walk around the village in which he is stationed. He is annoyed that everyone has gone fishing. He decides to take photographs, but spoils the film. “Rage and mortification” ensue.<sup>39</sup> He bemoans being “up against fate,” and laments that it will likely triumph. He also laments the appearance of some colleagues who “spoiled” his afternoon walk.<sup>40</sup> After going to bed, he speaks of being filled with “[intense], deeply emotional thoughts” about the woman he would like to marry, which were followed by “lecherous thoughts” about other men’s wives. Then, the entry ends with a description of the overwhelming guilt Malinowski felt for thinking so little of his mother who, back in Poland, daily missed her son while the World War raged around her. He finds his “failure” to think more of her “disgusting.”<sup>41</sup>

Contrast the tone and content of this passage with that of the introductory chapter of *Argonauts*, entitled “The Subject, Method, and Scope of This Inquiry.” There we observe Malinowski outline the scientific principles by which the ethnographer should conduct themselves and their study. He explains how the successful ethnographer must follow “a patient and systematic application of a number of rules of common sense and well-known scientific principles.”<sup>42</sup> He then outlines three “principles of method” that must structure the ethnographer’s work, which include knowing “the values and criteria of modern ethnography,” placing himself in “good conditions of work” (which here meant living in a place “without other white men”), and applying “special methods of collecting, manipulating and fixing his evidence.”<sup>43</sup> The introduction thus presents Malinowski, *the man of science*. The texture of his days in the field, often suffused with his sour moods and frustrations and impropriety, had been papered over by aspirations of scientific objectivity.

The contrast between the depictions of Malinowski deepens later in the introduction as Malinowski discusses the importance of “methodological candour.”<sup>44</sup> In order for an ethnographer

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<sup>38</sup> Christina A. Thompson, “Anthropology’s Conrad: Malinowski in the Tropics and What He Read,” *The Journal of Pacific History*, vol. 30, no. 1 (June 1995): 60, DOI: 10.1080/00223349508572783.

<sup>39</sup> Bronisław Malinowski, *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term*, trans. Norbert Guterman (London: The Athlone Press, 1989), 163.

<sup>40</sup> Malinowski, *Diary*, 163.

<sup>41</sup> Malinowski, *Diary*, 165.

<sup>42</sup> Bronisław Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea* (London: Routledge, 2005), 5.

<sup>43</sup> Malinowski, *Argonauts*, 5.

<sup>44</sup> Malinowski, *Argonauts*, 12.

to be “trusted,” he argues, it is incumbent upon them to “show clearly and concisely, in a tabularized form, which are his own direct observations, and which the indirect information that form the bases of his account.”<sup>45</sup> He then provides a table documenting his observations “as an example of this procedure.”<sup>46</sup> The table, entitled “Chronological List of Kula Events Witnessed By The Writer,” lists his expeditions in chronological order, annotated with brief statements about what was observed or achieved therein. If we look to, say, the annotation for the period during which the passage from Christmas Eve, 1917 falls, the only thing documented is the following: “December, 1917—February, 1918. Parties from Kitava arrive in Wawela. Collection of information about the *yoyova*. Magic and spells of Kaygua obtained.”<sup>47</sup> In light of the Christmas Eve entry’s glut of detail and description about the realities of a day in the field, Malinowski’s effort in *Argonauts* at “methodological candour” presents as anything but.

Because *Argonauts* had been the model of “proper” anthropological fieldwork, with the publication of the *Diary*, the “field experience that had set the standard for scientific cultural description was fraught with ambivalence,” suddenly casting the possibility of authentic ethnographic work into doubt.<sup>48</sup> In Clifford’s phrasing, “in its rawness and vulnerability, its unquestionable sincerity and inconclusiveness, the *Diary* seemed to deliver an unvarnished reality” that forced one to “grapple with the complexities of [ethnographic] encounters and to treat all textual accounts based on fieldwork as partial constructions.”<sup>49</sup>

It is worth emphasizing that the “unvarnished reality” Clifford spoke of referred not to the cultural other, but to the ethnographer himself. It referred not just to difficulties of the ethnographer’s encounter with the other, but to the ethnographer’s encounter with himself encountering the other. Malinowski’s *Diary* exposed a man at work behind the curtain who, it turned out, was different from the dispassionate anthropological maverick that *Argonauts* had depicted. The disparity between the images of Malinowski forced the anthropological field to consider whether similar sorts of disparities existed between the authors of other major anthropological works and the people they were while working in the field. Although few other major anthropologists left behind personal diaries as dramatically revealing and contradictory as Malinowski’s, the *Diary*’s revelations fostered a new kind of self-awareness concerning the field’s aspirations toward scientific objectivity.

While the *Diary*’s publication unearthed dimensions of ethnographic authorship that the field had been reticent to give due acknowledgement, it would be incorrect to suggest that it left anthropology in a weakened state. The fact of the matter was that anthropologists had attributed undue threat to the influence of subjectivity. The notion that subjectivity was a threat had been inherited from the natural and formal sciences, on whose principles anthropology had attempted

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<sup>45</sup> Malinowski, *Argonauts*, 12.

<sup>46</sup> Malinowski, *Argonauts*, 12.

<sup>47</sup> Malinowski, *Argonauts*, 13.

<sup>48</sup> Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, 97.

<sup>49</sup> Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, 97.

to model itself. Anthropology's efforts to resemble the natural and formal sciences were motivated by a desire to exert an authority over its objects of study in manners equivalent to such sciences. The problem, as the *Diary's* publication suggested, was that equivalent authority was impossible. But this impossibility did not mean that anthropology as a field was bankrupt or that it had been founded on false premises, as some anthropologists had feared. While the field may not have had the scientific power it previously thought, that did not mean it had *no* power; what anthropologists were forced to discern in the *Diary's* wake was what, precisely, was being accomplished in their work. Did they offer *the* understanding of a cultural other, or *an* understanding? The shift from definite article to indefinite article was an uncomfortable one to make, given the historical preference for authoritative definition, but it did not indicate a loss of legitimacy, as Geertz argued at the conclusion of *Works and Lives*.

As a final reflection on these matters, I suggest that the shift that was necessitated could be described as a pivot from authority to authenticity. The same kind of shift was reflected in Leiris' literary output. Authority had indicated, for Leiris, having power *over* something. It had implied a hierarchical model that pitted the superior over the inferior. As it related to his ethnographic work, the power dynamic in question was the colonizer over the colonized. Authenticity, on the other hand, refers to an *engagement with*, rather than power over. The movement toward authenticity entails a leveling effect whereby authority is distributed between author and reader. In the examples provided, authenticity was achieved, in the cases of Leiris and Lévi-Strauss, by intentionally foregrounding the subjective mechanics of their literary and ethnographic works (which become blended, of course), while in Malinowski's case, the emergence of subjective dynamics occasioned a difficult but necessary self-reassessment in the field.

Although vacating positions of authority come at the cost of being able to establish scientific certainty, the pivot to authenticity—achieved in the foregoing through the foregrounding of subjective mechanics of authorship—engenders a new, egalitarian relationship with readerships. Foregrounding the subjective mechanics of authorship establishes a rhetorical *ethos* that reveals an author who is thinking *with* the reader, as opposed to thinking *for* them. Thinking *with* thus replaces the ideal of being authoritative with a kind of engagement and Hegelian recognition of the subjectivity of the reader. The findings, conclusions, and narrative of the work are offered to the reader for their consideration, as opposed to being presented as definitive. That is, the pivot to authenticity is a pivot from obligatory acceptance to invited acceptance of the work, where the author recognizes the mutual subjectivity of the reader and locates the power to accept or reject the findings or claims in them. The work that is authentic in this manner is thus open-ended, leaving space for the reader to enter in and validate or invalidate as they see fit. The ultimate effect of foregrounding the subjective in the author is a recognition of the validity of the other—whether it be the cultural other of the anthropological field, or the reader encountering, navigating, and assessing the work presented to them.



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