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## Reading Against Culture in Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism*<sup>1</sup>

Daniel Martin Varisco

**Abstract** *Edward Said is the literary critic most cited by American anthropologists, but there has been relatively little anthropological examination of his concept of culture. Apart from an isolated attempt by Lila Abu-Lughod to 'write against culture', most anthropologists have ignored Said's approach. In Culture and Imperialism, Said draws on Matthew Arnold's 'best of the best' definition, while American anthropologists owe their holistic culture to fellow Victorian Edward Tylor. Claude Levi-Strauss is praised by Said, but other major anthropological approaches to culture are ignored. Said assumes anthropology is on the wrong side of the colonial divide, although he holds out hope for those who are now reading the work of literary and cultural critics. In this essay I compare Said's reading of anthropology, exemplified by Kipling's Colonel Creighton, to the influence of Bronislaw Malinowski and Franz Boas on ethnographic method.*

### Colonel Creighton's 'Great Game'

I cannot say whether it is now possible for anthropology as anthropology to be different, that is, to forget itself and to become something else as a way of responding to the gauntlet thrown down by imperialism and its antagonists. Perhaps anthropology as we have known it can only continue on one side of the imperial divide, there to remain as a partner in domination and hegemony.<sup>2</sup> (Said 1989: 225)

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<sup>1</sup> A version of this paper was first delivered at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association in December, 2001, and later in a seminar at the Department of Anthropology, SOAS, London University in October, 2002. I am grateful for comments and criticism from Najwa Adra, Jacques Berlinerblau, Magnus Bernhardsson, Steve Caton, Matthew Cook, Sayed El Aswad, Andrew Foster, Chris Leonard, Herbert Lewis, Chris Matthews, Larry Michalak, Richard Tapper and Shelagh Weir.

<sup>2</sup> I recognize that Said raises this point with rhetorical intent and then proceeds to suggest that a different story appears to be emerging. My purpose, as the analysis will show, is also rhetorical – questioning how Said approaches anthropology rather than what he, as an outsider, eventually concludes about a discipline not his own. My critique of Said's views on culture in no way detracts from my admiration for his courageous voice as an advocate for a peaceful solution of the Palestinian crisis and his inspiration to those who challenge entrenched dogmas and pervasive political biases. His passing in late 2003 was a loss for all who engage critically with the ineffable notion of culture.

The problem of power and culture, and their turbulent relations during the great metamorphosis of our social world, is too important to be left to lit crit. (Gellner 1994: 169)

No literary critic has travelled further around American anthropological discourse than Edward Said, whose *Orientalism* (Said 1979) is frequently cited and whose *Culture and Imperialism* (Said 1993) both overlays and underplays a disciplined, reflexivist self-critique of ethnographic authority.<sup>3</sup> While *Orientalism* has surprisingly little to say about anthropological texts, *Culture and Imperialism* has much to indicate about Said's rendering of 'culture' out of canonical Western texts. However, in the extensive literature about Said, little attention has been given to how he reads anthropological concepts of culture. I offer here the reading of an American anthropologist, a writing back to – in large part a writing against – the 'culture' that informs *Culture and Imperialism*. Several questions guide my analysis. Which anthropological texts on the culture concept does Said consult? I refer to those that are cited or conspicuously absent in his writings rather than the range of academic books adorning his bookshelves. Have anthropologists learned anything new or useful from Said's approach to culture? Is there theory in his worldly-finessed corner of cultural critique that anthropologists find worth traveling for, let alone with?

It is best to situate my own (con)textual attitude as an anthropologist who reads literary and cultural critics. In Saidian terms I begin with two strikes against me: ethnographic fieldwork experience among real Orientals and formal training in Arabic and Oriental Studies at a major Ivy League haven.<sup>4</sup> By writing for critics outside my formal discipline, I enter an academically foreign field as an interloper. Edward Said presented himself before my conventional guild in 1987 as an interlocutor, someone 'clamoring on the doorstep' and making 'so unseemly a disturbance as to be let in, guns or stones checked in with the porter, for further discussion' (Said 1989: 210). What I find disturbing in Said's diatribe against the discipline that defines tribes is more that his remarks are unfinished rather than unseemly. Said has no trouble listing and branding anthropologists – more on the hindsight end – but seminal anthropological texts remain unopened. I consider my response here a gentler knock, a pacifist polemic for a rhetorical quarrel that has gone on far too long. The quarrel is ostensibly over 'culture', a concept anthropologists naively thought they owned by default until the emergence of cultural studies in the latter half of the last century. Paraphrasing Gellner, the issue of culture is too important to be left to point-counterpoint across barbed defenses.

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<sup>3</sup> My focus here is on Said's reception in American anthropology largely because the response elsewhere in the discipline has been minimal; in this respect I adopt Brennan's argument (Brennan 2000: 560) that *Orientalism* is 'a profoundly American book' even as Said looks back over the broad Western canon in *Culture and Imperialism*.

<sup>4</sup> In 1978–1979 I lived among tribal farmers in highland Yemen and conducted an ethnographic study of their agricultural system and water laws. Since that time I have received four post-doctoral grants for the study of Arabic texts, mainly on thirteenth century Yemeni agriculture and folk astronomy.

Said's written corpus and extensive range of interviews indicate little knowledge of the trajectory of modern anthropology as an intellectual discipline.<sup>5</sup> His usage of 'anthropology' is widened philosophically to include Enlightenment icons such as Vico, Herder and Rousseau as part of an 'efflorescence of secular anthropology'. The 'rise of ethnography' is traced to Gobineau, Maine, Renan and von Humboldt – none of whom actually did ethnographic fieldwork or provided methodological models embraced by modern anthropology as a formal discipline (Said 1993: 44, 108).<sup>6</sup> Said, of course, is talking about long-standing ethnocentric views on the primitive other before the disciplined investigation of real others. Whether represented as a Hobbesian 'savage' savage or Rousseau's 'noble' savage, the exotic other in Western discourse was well-established long before anthropology was first taught in universities. Lacking a focus on ethnographic fieldwork as the major methodological constant in modern anthropology's rise, Said dismisses the entire field as yet another handmaiden of the dominant Western discourse machine that is 'Eurocentric in the extreme' and that 'often went hand in glove with a consciously undertaken imperial enterprise' (1993: 44, 48). Said further contends that anthropology has an 'unresolvable' problem of representing the other 'epistemologically defined as radically inferior', so that the 'whole science or discourse of anthropology depends upon the silence of this Other' (quoted in Viswanathan 2001: 42).

Anthropology, for Said, is thus a closed circuit – a politically charged one – in which *pouvoir* defines *savoir*. Just as Orientalism almost invented the Orient, anthropology becomes a less geographically specialized way of dominating the 'primitive' other as such. The novel twist in Said's argument is his choice for the archetypical anthropologist. Foregoing the founding fathers of social science faith, the ultimate (mis)anthropologist becomes Colonel Creighton, the burdened white man of Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*. 'In the extraordinarily rich text of *Kim*', writes Said, 'Kipling extrapolates the political meaning of that relationship and embodies it in the figure of Colonel Creighton, an ethnographer in charge of the Survey of India, also the head of British intelligence services in India, the 'Great Game' to which the young

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<sup>5</sup> Absent from Said's writings are numerous 'histories' of the discipline, most notably the past Columbia don Marvin Harris's *The Rise of Anthropological Theory* (Harris 1968) and a plethora of historiographic renderings of the discipline by George Stocking. Micaela di Leonardo notes a dissonance between what she views as the 'genuinely scholar tenor of Said's work as a whole' and his 'anthropological solecisms' (di Leonardo 1998: 44).

<sup>6</sup> In *Orientalism*, Said (1979: 297–98) may have been misled by his reading of Abdallah Laroui's critique (Laroui 1976: 44–80) of Gustave von Grunebaum, a historian of Islam whom Laroui targets rhetorically as an icon of 'cultural anthropology'. Ironically, the essentialist view of German Kulturkreislehre, a major influence on historian von Grunebaum, was a particular target of the early American anthropologist Franz Boas (1988: 85–93, reprinted from an 1896 *Science* article). Said is not alone in metaphorizing anthropology; see Marrouchi's (2000: 188) designation of Said as a 'wild anthropologist' because he quotes from fieldwork – where? – and tells stories about his 'being there' as a Palestinian.

Kim belongs (Said 1993: 56).<sup>7</sup> The anthropologist is thus realized as both a colonial era mapmaker of folklore and an overt operator of errant colonial policy. In this parading of Colonel Creighton, who is clearly aligned on the wrong side of the imperial divide, Said (1979: 227) expands upon comments in *Orientalism*, where the field of anthropology was lumped together with linguistics, history, Darwinism and high cultural humanism as reinforcing the division of the world into culture-laden categories of 'languages, races, types, colors, mentalities'. Colonel Creighton, for those who have read Said's *Orientalism*, is thus of the same rank as the swashbuckling Captain Richard Burton; both are at the (dis)service of empire.

None of the founding fathers or eminent guiding lights in the rise of modern anthropology would fit the role of Kipling's protagonist. Edward Tylor, the Englishman who inaugurated the modern field in the 1870s, was a Quaker pacifist, not a be(k)nighted colonial administrator. One would be hard pressed to find a staunch military man among the rank and file of what soon came to be known as 'Mr. Tylor's science'. On the American side, Lewis Henry Morgan, architect of a model of cultural evolution, was an early advocate of Native American rights. Being an anthropologist did not *ipso facto* liberate a scholar from being racist or ethnocentric, but the imagined Colonel Creightons and their real-life prototypes are not in the direct line of contemporary anthropology's descent.

In dismissing anthropology's imperialist-by-default heritage, Said fails to acknowledge the role of those anthropologists who have used their ethnographic and biological research to resist harmful racist and ethnic categorization and to critique European colonial policies. I find it ironic that Said, a distinguished professor at Columbia University, should have failed to note the pioneering deconstruction of the category of 'race' by Franz Boas, who founded anthropology at Columbia and trained the first generation of American anthropologists. Not only did Boas exemplify an academic scholar unambiguously critical of essentialized scientific models, but, in the words of Marvin Harris (1968: 292), he provided a 'distinguished record of public protest against racist bigotry'.<sup>8</sup> As a committed public intellectual, Boas argued against the academic grain of his time by insisting that the category of 'race' was a social construct. From this grounding, his student Ashley Montagu concluded: "'Race" is the witchcraft of our time. The means by which we exorcise demons. It is the contemporary myth. Man's most dangerous myth' (Montagu 1963: 23).<sup>9</sup> Nor does Said acknowledge the anthropological critique of simplistic and misleading accounts posed by missionaries, journalistic travellers and colonial administrators, like the fictitious Creighton.

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<sup>7</sup>The relationship which Said mentions here is between the outside Western ethnographer-observer and the primitive. A similar passage to this one can be found in Said (1989: 217).

<sup>8</sup>The role of Boas as a champion of human rights and opponent of racism is discussed by Herbert Lewis (2001: 447–67). A recent reanalysis of the data compiled by Boas to undermine the racial typologies of his day has concluded that despite major advances in methodology, Boas still 'got it right' (Gravlee *et al.* 2003).

<sup>9</sup>The first edition of this seminal text appeared in 1942; the sixth edition in 1997 with Altamira Press.

Modern anthropology came of age between the two world wars, during the waning of Colonel Creighton's colonial era. Said's mantra impeaches the *locus criminus* of guild practice: the 'field' which anthropologists can claim because they come from the colonial or neocolonial power in virtual control of that field. Earlier European and American ethnographers studied colonized peoples who had little choice in the matter. No researcher was free of Western ethnocentrism and some individuals fully supported the political goals of colonial administration. Such ethnographers were rarely the first Westerners to encounter 'primitive' others living under European control. The occasional anthropologist in the bush was not directing the policies of colonial rule and the direct impact of published ethnographies on forming such policy, positively or negatively, has arguably been minimal. In an influential critique levelled two decades before the publication of Said's *Culture and Imperialism*, Talal Asad concluded that 'it is a mistake to view social anthropology in the colonial era as primarily an aid to colonial administration, or as the simple reflection of colonial ideology' (Asad 1973: 18). As Asad and others have noted, there has always been a profound ambiguity in the way Western anthropologists have engaged supposedly 'primitive' others. Anthropologists continually cross a colonial divide they did not draw.

A case in point is Bronislaw Malinowski, who is credited within anthropology as initiating the central rite of academic passage known as participant observation fieldwork. As a Polish émigré during World War I, this British academic pragmatically chose to do research on a distant Melanesian Island. Living among the 'natives', observing their daily life, communicating in their language and attempting to elicit their points of view, Malinowski advocated a new 'science' of anthropology. Breaking with the categorical myth-remaking of James Frazer's encyclopaedic *The Golden Bough*, Malinowski proposed a common-sense functional approach to studying the exotic other where they lived. As his own field diaries – published posthumously and indiscretely by his second wife – indicate, the ideal of reaching an objective representation of the other was clouded by the baggage that the anthropologist brought with him from his own Western culture.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, he was under no illusion that the colonization policies of his chosen country were benign or benevolent. At the close of World War II, Malinowski wrote with a rhetorical flair reminiscent of Said's own worldly oppositional criticism:

There is no doubt that the destiny of indigenous races has been tragic in the process of contact with European invasion. We speak glibly about the 'spread of Western civilization', about 'giving the Natives the benefit of our own culture', about the 'Dual Mandate', and the 'White Man's Burden'. In reality, the historian of the future will have to register that Europeans in the past sometimes exterminated whole island peoples; that they expropriated most of the patrimony of savage races; that they introduced slavery in a specially

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<sup>10</sup>See Malinowski (1967). These diared sentiments express depression and loneliness, as well as more than a modicum of lust for naked island girls. Their publication created a major scandal in the discipline. Among the anthropologists who discuss the relevance of the diary revelations is Clifford Geertz (1988: 73–101).

cruel and pernicious form; and that even if they abolished it later, they treated the expatriated Negroes as outcasts and pariahs. (Malinowski 1961: 3–4)<sup>11</sup>

As an anthropological historian of that future, I suggest that Malinowski – fellow Pole to novelist Joseph Conrad, a special literary focus of Edward Said – should be read as the ‘essential’ anthropologist, rather than Kipling’s out-of-place colonel.

When Said lectured anthropologists at their convention in 1987, he omitted the first anthropologist he wrote about and perhaps one of the first he read. This is Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose *The Savage Mind* (Lévi-Strauss 1966) was once praised by Said as ‘one of the greatest books of the century’, and the author as ‘the most challenging intellectual figure today’ (Said 1967: 257, 268). Said provided Lévi-Strauss with the distinct honour of post-canonization, along with Giambattista Vico, one of his own intellectual heroes — each is entitled to ‘grammarian of culture’. The young Said admired the creator of structural anthropology for debunking the racist ideology of Gobineau, taking on the meta-existentializing of Sartre and demonstrating an uncanny ability to assimilate the views of opponents for his own rhetorical aims. It is not hard to see why such praise was given. A key argument in *The Savage Mind* was that anthropologists have been guilty of reducing the ‘savage’ to a being governed by organic or economic needs; seemingly objective scientists are thus trapped by structural categories not of their making (Lévi-Strauss 1966: 19). In *Tristes Tropiques*, an eloquent accounting of the ethnographer’s unequal encounter with the ‘primitive’ other, Lévi-Strauss earlier posed a contradiction, an inconsistency that goes to the core of anthropology’s virtually unique emphasis on ‘being there’ in ‘exotic’ worlds so seemingly different from Western standards: ‘How could we announce that these societies were “important”, if our judgment were not based on the values of the society which inspired us to begin our researches’ (Lévi-Strauss 1961: 383). ‘We ourselves’, he continues, ‘were the products of certain inescapable norms; and if we claimed to be able to estimate one form of society in its relation to another we were merely claiming, in a shamefaced and roundabout way, that our society was superior to all the others’. This is no casual variant of cultural relativism, no suspension of the need to speak truth to power, but rather a recognition that our endemic ethnocentrism cannot be suspended at will by unreflective claims for objectivity. Like Rousseau, Foucault, Said and so many others, the impassioned goal of this Lévi-Straussian anthropology was recon-

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<sup>11</sup> Malinowski enumerates the ways in which Europeans only ‘take’ from Africans in the assumed give-and-take of cultural encounter. Wendy James (1973) argues that Malinowski was part of a ‘radical criticism’ of the colonial enterprise, especially in Africa. For a review of how Said and others have misrepresented Malinowski and others, see Lewis (1998).

ciling 'the problem of metaphysics with the problem of human behavior' (Lévi-Strauss 1961: 395).<sup>12</sup>

Lévi-Strauss excited Said in 1967, although few other contemporary anthropologists appear in Said's *corpus delicti* until his 1987 lecture to the anthropologists. There he finally acknowledges a critical anthropology beyond the French structuralist Claude Lévi-Strauss and the colonial Colonel. The roll-call includes intellectual oppositionists who are said to be Marxist or anti-imperialist (June Nash, William Roseberry, Michael Taussig, the early Eric Wolf), feminist (Lila Abu-Lughod, Emily Martin), interested in political struggle (Jean Comaroff, Richard Fox), concerned with contemporary American issues such as religious fundamentalism (Susan Harding) and aware of the social problems in development (Shelton Davis). Although these acceptable anthropologists may make the list, their ideas are not analysed in Said's lecture or later texts, including *Culture and Imperialism* (1993). A notable exception is Said's dismissal of Eric Wolf's *Europe and the People Without History* (Wolf 1982) as a text that unreflectively and in a 'somewhat self-congratulatory' manner misrepresents the other by under-analysing the self (Said 1993: 64). Said unfairly characterises this influential text, since Wolf's critique of Western exploitation of non-Western peoples – including the false model of a quintessential West and an equally quintessential East – is a major feature. Wolf's book illustrates how societies, often treated by anthropologists as isolated and closed systems, were politically invented in the course of Western capitalist expansion. It is hard to see what Said would find silencing with a thesis that concludes: 'This book has asked what difference it would make to our understanding if we looked at the world as a whole, a totality, a system, instead of as a sum of self-contained societies and cultures; if we understood better how this totality developed over time; if we took seriously the admonition to think of human aggregates as "inextricably involved with other aggregates, near and far, in weblike, netlike connections..."' (Wolf 1982: 384). Scholars who

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<sup>12</sup>Said expands on Lévi-Straussian structuralism in *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (1975), where he cites the following works of Lévi-Strauss: *The Raw and the Cooked*, *The Savage Mind*, *Totemism*, and *Tristes Tropiques*, as well as several articles and a book review. It is telling that in *Beginnings* Said indexes Lévi-Strauss and *bricolage*, but not culture, anthropology, ethnology or sociology. A more nuanced study of Lévi-Strauss is given by Tzvetan Todorov (1993: 60–89). Said (1975: 320) makes a careless error in his misreading of an interview conducted by Georges Charbonnier (1969) with Lévi-Strauss: 'For Lévi-Strauss, on the other hand, the beginning is the initial violence of language itself, which makes its hypothetical first appearance during the neolithic age in catalogs of property, including lists of slaves. Yet Lévi-Strauss has never systematically introduced this hypothesis (mentioned in an interview with Georges Charbonnier) into his investigations: those do not depend upon an incorporated beginning, such as Foucault's, for their coherence' (Said 1975: 320). Lévi-Strauss does not link written 'language' anachronistically to the Neolithic era. In the original passage in question, Lévi-Strauss specifically refers to what happened 'after' the Neolithic; he is hardly offering a 'hypothesis' in this spontaneous remark on an archaeological subject about which he has no claimed expertise.

know Wolf's work are generally at a loss to understand why this concerned intellectual, one of the most outspoken anthropological critics of imperialist-minded American foreign policy, would be singled out by Said for such an inappropriate verbal dressing-down.<sup>13</sup>

### Culture vs. discourse

In the first place, culture is used to designate not merely something to which one belongs but something that one possesses, and, along with that proprietary process, culture also designates a boundary by which the concepts of what is extrinsic or intrinsic to the culture come into forceful play. These things are not controversial... But, in the second place, there is a more interesting dimension to this idea of culture as possessing a possession. And that is the power of culture by virtue of its elevated or superior position to authorize, to dominate, to legitimate, demote, interdict, and validate: in short, the power of culture to be an agent of, and perhaps the main agency for, powerful differentiation within its domain and beyond it too. (Said 1983: 8, 9)

As I use the word, 'culture' means two things in particular. First of all it means those practices, like the arts of description, communication, and representation, that have relative autonomy from the economic, social, and political realms and that often exist in aesthetic forms, one of whose principal aims is pleasure... Second, and almost imperceptibly, culture is a concept that includes a refining and elevating element, each society's reservoir of the best that has been known and thought, as Matthew Arnold put it in the 1860s. (Said 1993: xii)

While anthropology, for Said in 1987, was still posed precariously on the wrong side of the imperial divide, he saw hope in 'recent anthropological efforts critically to reexamine the notion of culture' (Said 1989: 225). Apart from bric-à-brac(keting) Lévi-Strauss, Said does not incorporate or respond to specifically anthropological discourse on this topic in *Culture and Imperialism*. In *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, he references Kroeber and Kluckhohn's then ancient 'thesaurus' on the variety of meanings given for culture, but only as a hurdle to be jumped over rather than a resource that frames the earlier debate over the culture concept. This latter text was compiled in the 1950s, but the discussion of culture had continued unabated in professional journals and

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<sup>13</sup>In contrast, Fernando Coronil (1996) describes Wolf's attempt to bring 'non-Western peoples into the Self's history'. For an extended critique of Said's failure to consider Wolf's activist voice denouncing anthropology's role in imperialism, see di Leonardo (1998: 47–49). It is ironic that Said quotes in depth an excerpt on the attempt of the Department of Defense to usurp research when Wolf was consistently one of the most vocal critics of such political intrusion; as was Marshall Sahlins (2000: 261–68). A decade before Said published *Orientalism*, the 'skeletons in the anthropological closet' had been articulated and laid bare in a pioneering volume edited by Dell Hymes (1969).

books up to Said's anti-ethnographic present. 'The professional student of culture', however, is glossed by Said as 'the humanist, the critic, the scholar' (Said 1993: 56), as though the discipline that has the most direct experience with cultures worldwide – in the meaningful plural that makes all culture worldly – is not worth reading about.

Given Said's academic training in literature and his Western orientation to virtually everything critical, the culture concept most prominent in all of Said's work is not surprisingly that of the Victorian literatus Matthew Arnold. If there is any one part of the Saidian corpus that anthropologists should find problematic from the beginning, it is this intellectualist rendering of such a central concept. Said compounds his indifference to discussions among anthropologists regarding culture with a naive reliance on the sickeningly sweet – my oxymoron is intentional – Arnoldian view of culture as 'the best which has been thought and said in the world' (Arnold 1965: 233). 'Culture', comments Said, 'is an instrument for identifying, selecting, and affirming certain "good" things, forms, practices, or ideas over others and in so doing culture transmits, diffuses, partitions, teaches, presents, propagates, persuades, and above all it creates and recreates itself as specialized apparatus for doing all those things' (Said 1983: 176). It is quite clear that Arnold (1879: 136) views the 'best' as coming primarily from literature; so does Said.

All disciplines have customary ways of doing things. The trajectory of anthropology as a modern academic field extends back to the late nineteenth century when Victorian scholar Edward Tylor – a compatriot of Matthew Arnold – provided what became the central defining concept of culture as a complex whole that included what people did as well as what they thought and made. Tylor's 1871 definition of culture has earned him the reputation of a founding father for anthropology: 'Culture or civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society'.<sup>14</sup> The primary merit of his broad and thus serviceable definition is that it liberated culture from its overtly ethnocentric rendering as 'civilized' or an elitist 'best of the best' in the Arnoldian sense. Since Said subscribes to the textual privileging of culture exemplified by Matthew Arnold, it is important to indicate the ways these two Victorian gentlemen stimulated a major and unfortunate gap in the evolving use of the term 'culture' between anthropologists and students of literature. The key difference in the 'modern' sense is representing culture as a condition or state of all human societies rather than the cultivation of mind implicit in previous philosophical usage and central to Arnold's concept. The significance of Tylor's synthetic inventing of a new science of anthropology is that it took seriously the rapidly evolving paradigm that humans were different from animals only by degree rather than in immutably casted categories. Before Tylor fixed on the rallying cry of the 'psychic unity of mankind', endemic

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<sup>14</sup>Quoted in Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1963: 14) and Lévi-Strauss (1967: 19), Tylor apparently drew on the nuance provided in the German of Gustav Klemm's *Allgemeine Culturwissenschaft der Menschheit* (1843). In the last three decades many introductory anthropology texts have begun with Tylor's seminal definition (for example, Hicks and Gwynne 1994: 47).

Western racism had kept what Said labels 'anthropology' chained to the theologian's delight in Natural History. Since 'race' was no longer God-given in a Darwinian framework, an attempt could finally be made to analyse what humans have in common rather than reiterating the categorical fault lines that necessarily privileged the Christendom(inated) Western self over 'other' sons of Adam. It is not surprising that Tylor advocated an approach to human societies as evolving systems rather than the prized possession of a 'cultured' elite. Just as Darwin liberated human origins from the Biblical line of begats back to Adam, so Tylor sought to free the study of humanity from its concentration on the achievements of Christianity and Western civilization.<sup>15</sup> This is the only sense in which Tylor's radical book title *Primitive Culture* could escape being an oxymoron in Victorian thought.

Is it possible that American anthropologists have recognized the wrong father of their culture concept? In a critical analysis from the mid-1960s of the impact of Tylor, historian George Stocking (1968: 72–73) challenged the conventional reading, labelling it an 'anthropological creation story', a Whiggish reading back of a modern sense that Tylor did not share.<sup>16</sup> Stocking further maintained that Tylor was simply making Arnold's culture concept fit an evolutionary time scale, and that the literary critic's view of culture was actually closer to what Stocking then called 'the modern anthropological idea of culture' (1968: 89). In 1963, when Stocking was pushing his point, the 'modern' idea he had in mind was in fact the now discarded 'culture and personality' approach that had characterized a major part of the growth of American anthropology and which lent credence to the genre of reductionist renderings of cultural patterns exemplified by Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead. The danger here is that in glossing over the blatantly elitist ethnocentrism moralistically mooring Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*, the Arnoldian definition of culture is cleaned up as a generically acceptable 'way of life' while ignoring the fact that it privileges literature which is read, words out of intelligent mouths, thoughts in cultivated minds – the 'best' only in an intellectualised sense. The key point is that Tylor's culture concept can be salvaged from the overlay of inevitable progress to a Western level, while Arnold's 'way of life' was one that only the already civilised could attain.

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<sup>15</sup> It is worth noting that Tylor followed the same distancing approach from his own cultural assumptions in defining religion as a general belief in spirits rather than the notion of 'God' (Pals 1996: 24).

<sup>16</sup> Stocking is reacting to the observation by Kroeber and Kluckhohn that it was almost fifty years before Tylor's definition entered formal dictionaries. Arnold's definition was included in the *OED* right away, but Tylor's did not make it until the 1933 supplement. While Kroeber and Kluckhohn saw this as evidence of how long it can take a scientific concept to gain acceptance in the 'avowedly literary segment' of society, Stocking countered that Tylor's view was simply not as modern as that of Arnold's. However, Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1963: 287, note 2) observe that the early shapers of anthropology, like Pitt-Rivers, did run with Tylor's definition. With the benefit of hindsight, Tylor's view is all the more to be respected for not matching the now outmoded culture concept discussed in the 1960s by Stocking. For recent assessments of the evolution of the culture concept in anthropology, see Kuper (1999) and Borofsky *et al.* (2001).

Stocking (1968: 87) admits that *Primitive Culture* would have been a contradiction to the man who wrote *Culture and Anarchy*; that alone makes the Arnoldian approach to culture antithetical to modern ethnographic method.

Stocking's dated comments on Tylor aside, anthropologists rarely discuss Matthew Arnold's concept of culture, except to acknowledge its undisguised ethnocentrism. Said is also aware of the problematic 'hierarchies and ethnic preferences' of Matthew Arnold's unbending justification of Britain's strong-arm tactics. This flows from Arnold's conservative belief that 'the very framework and exterior order of the State' is sacred, so that any attack on the authority of the state, such as a strike or demonstration, leads to anarchy (Said 1983: 11). The perverse implications of Arnold's position are not spelled out by Said beyond noting that they are 'profoundly important'. I am not aware of any passage in which Said labels Arnold an 'Orientalist', although surely he is as complicit in Said's own definition as Karl Marx, who is chided in *Orientalism* for defending British imperialism in India. Arnold clearly viewed his own British culture, despite its anarchic tendencies, as the best of the best: 'No people in the world have done more and struggled more to attain this relative moral perfection than our English race has' (Arnold 1965: 100). Ironically, Said's critical opposition to British imperialism and defence of Palestinian activism would brand him by Arnoldian logic as an anarchist rather than a defender of culture. Said inexplicably chooses to rescue Arnold's culture by simply brushing aside the inseparable link which Arnold himself made to its 'manifestly destined' power over oppositional anarchy.

There is a crucial paradox, an indelibly marked inconsistency, in Said's stance of oppositional criticism aimed at culturally approved 'power', at the same time that his very notion of 'culture' assumes the legitimacy of privileging power. 'For all his suspicion of high cultural humanism, Said remains a high cultural humanist' — this is William Hart's (Hart 2000: 29) emphasis in a recent study of Said's secularized fear of religion. More recently, Abdirahman Hussein (2002: 180) has defended Said's reference to Arnoldian 'high' culture by suggesting that 'it is precisely this valorized notion of culture-as-hegemony (and not culture as such)' which Said most severely criticises. In this sense Said is credited with challenging a concept which is itself so ambiguous that it is directly implicated in imperialistic othering. Yet, as Hussein argues, the notion of culture that Said interrogates is more narrowly 'culture-as-hegemony', although certainly not in the Marxist mode. This defence is unconvincing, falling back on the excuse that Said's methodological flaws can be excused since his critical heart is in the right place.

While both Arnold and Said are fixated by the role of cultural power, there is a critical difference. Arnold pegs anarchy as the greatest evil, while Said seems to fear conformity most. Guilds in complicity with state power invariably create and perpetuate the dreaded dogmas in Said's critical vision. Thus academic megafields like Orientalism are ideological by default. This also explains Said's consistent antagonism for Marxism and the 'New Criticism' of the American Left. Such Marxism, argues Said, proffers 'oppositional debate without real opposition', and accommodates 'the wild exigencies of rhetoric while surrendering its true radical prerogatives' (Said 1983: 160). Where Marxists are alleged to fear to tread, Said issues a clarion oppositional call: 'To

what degree has culture collaborated in the worst excesses of the State, from its imperial wars and colonial settlements to its self-justifying institutions of antihuman repression, racial hatred, economic and behavioral manipulation?' (1983: 177). This is the kind of question Marx himself would and did pose, but Matthew Arnold would oppose with all the best in his critical arsenal. The literary genealogy that traces intellectual ascent from Arnold as a critic of wrongly directed bureaucratic culture remakes him as a patron saint of intellectual criticism without coming to terms with the patronizing ethnocentric politics of the man in his time.<sup>17</sup>

The Arnoldian 'culture' of some literary critics is not the culture recognised by anthropologists as a complex whole, a habitual process shared by all human societies at any stage of social evolution, from the time when all humanity had its beginning. The polarization of culture and anarchy, no less than the binary cloning of culture and imperialism, provides little room for thinking beyond the duelling dogmas of past culture theory. As Nicholas Dirks (1992: 22) suggests, to the extent that the Arnoldian assertion of culture as a privileged domain could be useful for interpreting culture, anthropology must democratise and universalise it. Said refuses to allow this, escaping from the task by claiming that how all cultures operate – hegemonically – is 'a topic for comparative anthropologists' (Said 1983: 14). With his privileged amateur status, Said thus makes a virtue out of not 'advancing a completely worked out theory' (Said 1993: 14) of the connection between culture and literature or imperialism, as though one can construct by simply opposing a part of what is already there.

Said's chosen starting point for 'culture' suggests what it consists of as well as what it constitutes and authorizes. In *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, he goes beyond the obvious sense of product – 'something that one possesses' – to process: 'culture also designates a boundary by which the concepts of what is extrinsic or intrinsic to the culture come into forceful play' (Said 1983: 14). Here it is the syntactic dimension of culture in generating cultural discourse that Said discusses. As formulated, this is dangerously close to saying that culture is that which defines its own borders, a solipsist involution as devious as the pedagogical push by conservative religious apologists for intelligent design of the universe. In *Culture and Imperialism* Said returns to the more common sense of culture as 'practices, like the arts of description, communication, and representation, that have relative autonomy from the economic, social, and political realms and that often exist in aesthetic forms...' (Said 1993: xii). In both cases, culture is viewed metaphorically as a kind of

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<sup>17</sup>This paradox has already been noted by Gossman (1990: 48) and Young (1990: 227–28; 1995: 63). Arnold's approach was indeed criticised all along. W. G. Sumner, apparently writing in the 1880s, offered this sardonic note: 'Mr. Arnold, the great apostle, if not the discoverer, of culture, tried to analyze it and found it to consist of sweetness and light. To my mind, this is like saying that coffee is milk and sugar. The stuff of culture is all left out of it' (quoted in Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1963: 55). T. S. Eliot tried to reconcile Arnold with Tylor, but not in a way that made sense to Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1963: 61–62); Aijaz Ahmad (1992: 71) is critical of attempts by literary critics to place the Victorian Arnold alongside the radical socialist views of Gramsci, as though they had a similar theoretical position.

grammar. The economic, social and political products in culture are of no more interest than letters, syllables or even words in a language. The relevance of culture for Said is how it allows and at the same time orders processes of describing, communicating and representing. It is not what culture is, but rather what culture programmatically does as a kind of programmatic discourse. It would appear in this framework that there is little that culture could theoretically not do.

Had Said consulted anthropological reviews of culture beyond Kroeber and Kluckhohn's compilation of who said what before 1950, he might have found common cause with several culture concepts that are consciously modeled on a linguistic metaphor. One notable example of this is Ward Goodenough's recipe-reading of culture: 'expectations one has of one's fellows may be regarded as a set of standards for perceiving, believing, evaluating, communicating, and acting. These standards constitute the culture that one attributes to one's fellows...' (Goodenough 1970: 99). Goodenough considers the manifest features of what people habitually do as a society's structure, not its culture. From this perspective of ethno-science or cognitive anthropology, formulating a set of standards that allows one to function in a culture becomes a variation of discovering the grammar of a given language so one can speak it.<sup>18</sup> Discriminating cultural standards is analogous to the way in which linguists apply phonemics in analysing language use. Thus, the ultimate goal of ethnography, the anthropologist's main methodological tool, becomes knowing 'how an ethnographer can come to share a set of understandings with the people he studies and how he can in turn share these same understandings with the audience for whom he writes an ethnographic report' (1970: 12). Knowing a culture means being fluent enough to act appropriately in that culture.

I am not suggesting that Goodenough was articulating the dominant anthropological view of culture at the time, but simply that there was more to culture theory than Matthew Arnold, the earlier definitions archived in Kroeber and Kluckhohn and the structuralism of Lévi-Strauss. In this regard, there is a notable absence in Said's corpus of Clifford Geertz's major 'interpretive' social hermeneutic of culture in the early 1970s. Dangling a metaphor from Max Weber, Geertz suggested that culture should be approached semiotically: 'man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun' (Geertz 1973: 5), these webs metaphorizing culture. Geertz distanced his approach from the cognitive anthropology of Goodenough as well as from the old-style behaviourist mentality that reduces culture to a set of traits and observably classifiable behaviour. Indeed, it is Clifford Geertz, more than any other anthropologist, who can be credited with raising the consciousness of anthropologists about the textuality of their ethnographies. Although developing different theoretical agendas, both Goodenough and Geertz were trying to lay bare the seemingly inherent power that melded 'collective' representations and seemed to direct behaviour in bounded ways. Neither addressed nor had any patience for the Arnoldian 'bestiality', to coin a phrase, of culture as a civilizing tool.

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<sup>18</sup> A survey of the development of the 'cognitive anthropology' advocated by Goodenough and others is provided by Roy D'Andrade (1995).

Rhetorically, Said plays on the manifold meanings that culture connotes across a plethora of disciplines. In a singular fashion, he glides between the sweetness of 'culture' as such and various sweetened or soured 'cultures' in the world. Said seems oblivious to the ambiguity in his continual cross-rendering of culture in the collective and the singular. 'Partly because of empire, all cultures are involved in one another, none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic', he argues in *Culture* (note the singular) and *Imperialism* (Said 1993: xxv). In like manner, a given culture can resemble a given text, just as *Heart of Darkness* is so 'hybrid, impure, and complex a text' (1993: 68). His specific examples, given his focus on Eurocentric colonialism, are national cultures that also tend to be heterogeneous. Said routinely refers to as broad a geographically indistinct conglomerate as essentialised Western culture, although studiously avoiding all references to an authentic 'Oriental' culture. No attention is paid to the nesting of cultures, British and French being in effect sub-cultures of Western culture, not to mention the further division of British culture into Anglo, Irish, Scottish, Welsh, immigrant and the like. The problem here is that the 'cultures' rendered in *Culture and Imperialism*, at least on an epistemological level, are not commensurate. At times they range beyond definable borders on the same generalised pattern of 'societies' or 'ethnicities'.

The 'culture' opposed by his title to imperialism is more abstract and far more problematic than its pluralised usage. 'Besides,' writes Said, 'culture is not monolithic either, and is not the exclusive property of East or West, nor of small groups of men or women' (1993: xxiv). This is a truism that few anthropologists would dispute. However, a rhetorical trap appears when that which makes specific cultures cultural is that they all have something also called culture. This is where Said's twofold definition is refined in sugar-coated Arnoldian terms, both 'the power of culture by virtue of its elevated or superior position to authorize, to dominate, to legitimate, demote, interdict, and validate' (Said 1983: 9) and its privileged 'refining and elevating element' (Said 1993: xiii). Said is compelled, like most anthropologists, to go beyond the collective sense of what the notion of culture 'consists of' – specifically, cultures – to what it 'does to'. This explains Said's attraction to Gramsci's suggestion of 'elaboration' as 'the central cultural activity,' and thus 'the material making a society a society' (Said 1983: 171). But if, as Arnold and Said suggest, culture literally serves the state, how is such a defining role played out in specific cultures that have no state in the modern sense, such as the Yanomamo or even the Palestinians? Indeed, how could culture in the 'best' sense exist outside the ideological frame of a civilized 'state'?<sup>19</sup>

By not probing the ambiguity in his own rhetoric, Said can proceed to make retroactive claims on the nature of culture writ large. After discussing

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<sup>19</sup> Compare the observation of Marshall Sahlins (2000: 549) in a recent survey of the protohistory of anthropology's culture concept: 'Motivated by the notion of the social as the control of the individual, Western philosophers have too often conflated the origin of society with the origin of state'. Ulin provides a similar critique of the theoretical approach of Raymond Williams: 'We must therefore ask to what extent his notion of cultural hegemony is applicable to pre-capitalist social formations and indigenous societies' (Ulin 1984: 165).

the specific case of European imperialism, Said assumes 'There is no reason to doubt that all cultures operate in this way or to doubt that on the whole they tend to be successful in enforcing their hegemony' (1983: 14). From an anthropological perspective, there is very good reason to doubt this. By extrapolating only from a contemporary reading of cultural dynamics as manifest in Eurocentric thinking, the understanding of culture as a pan-human affair is prejudiced from the start. Switching at will between singular and plural, Said has little to offer anthropologists who have become only too aware of the blinders imposed in such a reading (back). The problem noted by James Clifford in critiquing Said's *Orientalism* sums up my frustration well: 'the absence in his book of any developed theory of culture as a differentiating and expressive ensemble rather than as simply hegemonic and disciplinary' (Clifford 1988: 263).<sup>20</sup> Gellner dismisses *Culture and Imperialism* for likewise offering 'no general discussion of cultural transformation' (Gellner 1994: 162). As Roy D'Andrade complains about the general postmodern reading of culture, 'it is a theory in which there is only one real system, the power system' (D'Andrade 1995: 251). Reading culture as a discursive powerplay would seem to be the best Said has to offer those who venture off to observe cultures.

If cultures should be read as texts in the way Said reads Kipling's *Kim*, interpretation must advance beyond semantic potential. A given text is a product frozen in time, the work of a real author even when authorship is denied teleological priority. In this sense, no individual culture, and certainly not the overarching progression of human interaction, can ever be reduced to text. The culture framed and written about textually is always the culture as perceived from a particular individual's angle in time and form. As a limited set of frames, it should not be conflated with the reality it has been created to represent. Said and Arnold view culture as an aesthetic theoretically alienable from economic, political and social realms. Indeed, the appeal of such a culture concept is that it serves as the refining and elevating element, as Said puts it, that makes ultimate sense of all human behaviour as uniquely human. The problem with such an approach to culture is that it can only be a reading back from the privileged view of the present, so that all previous 'cultures' tend to be subsumed as variants of the viewer's own cultural perch.

## Writing against culture

The notion of culture (especially as it functions to distinguish 'cultures'), despite a long usefulness, may now have become something anthropologists would want to work against in their theories, their ethnographic practice, and their ethnographic writing. (Abu-Lughod 1991: 139)

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<sup>20</sup> Apart from Clifford, reviews of *Orientalism* seldom addressed Said's assumptions about culture (Mani and Frankenberg 1985: 188). Although Said mentions Clifford briefly in his AAA lecture, he does not respond to Clifford's widely cited critique of *Orientalism*.

The followers of Foucault, Edward Said, and Johannes Fabian have managed to do to anthropology what Said says Westerners have done to the Orient or to the Other: invent something that never existed in order to dominate it. (Lewis 1998: 716)

My reading of the literature in my own discipline suggests that most anthropologists remain unconvinced that Edward Said has stimulated a better understanding of the culture concept. The anthropologist who has travelled furthest with admiration of the thesis in *Orientalism* is Lila Abu-Lughod. As an ethnographer of the Awlad 'Ali, a Bedouin society in the Western Desert of Egypt, Abu-Lughod entered the field as a 'dutiful daughter' of a prominent Arab American scholar.<sup>21</sup> Her acclaimed ethnography, *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society* (Abu-Lughod 1986), draws on Foucault's notion of discourse to frame the 'politics of sentiment' among the women she studied in Egypt. Significantly, the discourse expressed through Bedouin women's poetry liberates against a dominant tribal ideology that privileges maleness. 'For Awlad 'Ali,' Abu-Lughod argues, 'poetry represents what is best in their culture, what they consider distinctively Bedouin' (1986: 251). How Arnoldian. Yet, in terms that would horrify the Victorian Arnold, these Bedouin elaborate and sanction poetry as a 'discourse of rebellion'. Unlike Said's rendering of *Orientalism* as a discourse of domination, these Bedouin provide an example of real Orientals representing themselves to themselves. After Said's 1987 lecture at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Abu-Lughod followed up on Said's suggestion of writing against essentialising discourse in anthropological theory. 'Therefore,' she urges, 'anthropologists should now pursue, without exaggerated hopes for the power of their texts to change the world, a variety of strategies for writing against culture' (Abu-Lughod 1991: 251).<sup>22</sup>

The specific notion of culture that Lila Abu-Lughod is writing against is one that most anthropologists would concur needs to be delegitimized. 'Anthropological discourse gives culture difference (and the separation between groups of people it implies) the air of the self-evident' (1991: 143), she argues. This makes it a conceptual cognate of 'race', although she immediately recognises that unlike race, a concept of culture 'removes difference from the realm of the natural and the innate' (1991: 144). From here on her argument stumbles over a series of despites: 'Despite its anti-essentialist intent, however, the culture concept retains some of the tendencies to freeze difference possessed by concepts like race' (1991: 144). This is a difficult claim to sustain. Since culture is conceived by anthropologists as something that is learned and can change, it deviates significantly from entrenched biologically-based notions of race.

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<sup>21</sup> A reflexive account of her fieldwork is provided in Abu-Lughod (1988). Her father, Ibrahim Abu-Lughod, was a well-respected political scientist of Palestinian origin. He was also a close friend of Edward Said, who acknowledges his support for the writing of *Orientalism*.

<sup>22</sup> The quoted passages by Abu-Lughod in the succeeding paragraphs all stem from this article. Similar points are made in the introduction to her *Writing Women's Worlds: Bedouin Stories* (Abu-Lughod 1993).

Throughout her essay Abu-Lughod wavers between criticism of anthropologists who seem to take culture for granted and acknowledgement that some have been actively deconstructing older notions. Unlike Said, she notes that cultural anthropologists have 'long questioned' the idea of scientific objectivity, pursued 'self-conscious opposition to racism', developed 'a fast-growing, self-critical literature on anthropology's links to colonialism' and are writing experimentally about culture. I know of no anthropologist who would disagree with the valid point in her dependent clause: 'If anthropology continues to be practiced as the study by an unproblematic and unmarked Western self of found "others" out there [...]' (1991: 139). The problem is assuming such an 'if' has always been the norm. A major flaw in her argument is the unprobed assumption that any concept of culture must essentialise in a powerfully negative way, just as the manifestly false invention of 'Orient' does. Said is right to question the du(elplicitous binary of West vs. East as an imaginative geography that necessarily instates a power-ployed difference. Yet, Abu-Lughod is writing primarily against an assumed tendency to essentialise or freeze 'cultures', rather than the anthropological position that human beings all share, in their collective evolution, a qualitative cultural distinction from other species.<sup>23</sup>

Abu-Lughod valorises Said's thesis about Orientalism and seconds his suspicions of the way in which anthropologists work within, or at least alongside, the imperialist rendering of the real world. But apart from admiring his stance as a humanist, which she tactfully amends in a call for 'tactical humanism', it is hard to see how this results in anything new. The reflexivist concern among anthropologists for unveiling the power issue in ethnography both as a field method and a form of academic writing predates Said's interlocation.<sup>24</sup> Dragging Said's textual attitude into the field – pun intended – results in Abu-Lughod's (1991: 154) connotative conflating of characteristics such as 'homogeneity, coherence, and timelessness' as necessarily negative when used by anthropologists. Andrew Shryock suggests that Abu-Lughod is essentially writing against 'androcentric, agonistic discourse,' adding that this 'slights a world of experience and concern' (Shryock 1997: 314). Such writing is not aided constructively by Said's exilicentric view of culture.

In critiquing the discourse of Orientalism, Said makes a powerful case for how discursive norms operate through a specific genealogy of texts. Yet, one of the historical strengths of modern anthropology, stemming back to Tylor, is the argument that, because humans all have the biological and social potential to be rational and to cooperate, the alleged differences based on religious texts and racial theories are arbitrary. Anthropological critiques of racism and

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<sup>23</sup> Or, at least most other species. Many anthropologists, myself included, would argue that the idea of being human as opposed to being some other kind of animal is equally artificial. My point, however, is that making such a distinction need not be negative or destructive but rather can serve as a basis for uniting multiple others around commonly shared adaptive features and social practices.

<sup>24</sup> In a critique of Abu-Lughod's position, Lindholm (1995: 807) notes that the indictment of essentialising others was well established by prominent anthropologists like Clifford Geertz and Pierre Bourdieu before Said came along. For a defence of anthropological writing about culture, see Brumann (1999).

ethnocentrism have, at times, transcended the categorisation of distinct cultures, precisely because what evolving humans share is something species-wide called culture. In theory even the most 'exotic' cultures in Western eyes can be approached as essentially human rather than categorically dismissed as inferior and uncivilised. The overriding anthropological view of culture allows for a brand of humanism, informed by scientific exploration of human evolution, quite distinct from the overt ethnocentrism of specifically Western classification schemes and textual renderings. This is what separates humans from the beasts rather than the best-of-the-best humans from their cultural inferiors.

It makes as little sense to write against culture in Abu-Lughod's ambivalent terms as it does to suggest, pace Gellner, that probing the link between power and culture is too important to be left to literary critics. Critical issues like the very question of what it means to be human are far too important to be overshadowed by rhetoric and polemic stemming from the inevitable dogma-prone disciplines and institutions through which we are channelled and routinised. I write as an anthropologist who views the best voices in my discipline as calling for the divesting of knowledge from its on-going imperial divisions. I respect the work of critics who pursue the same goal in the textual world that ensnares us both. My writing against *Culture and Imperialism* is motivated primarily by what Said failed to read, not because he has been trained to read differently. Contrapuntally, Said's sugar-coating of culture is as much an absence, a cavity resulting from less informed critique, as a blow to the power which all politicised essentialisms share. I do not choose to write against culture, although I share the concern of Abu-Lughod that those who use cultural categories to freeze difference have yet to realise the unifying potential of diversity. An anthropological approach to culture as a concept is not the problem; reading into it is.

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