Beyond the Historic Turn: Toward an Anthropology of History
Organizers: Stephan Palmié and Charles Stewart

Double Session Panel

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KEYWORDS: Affect, History, Time, Temporal Ontology, Historicism, Ethnography of History, Materiality, Evolutionary Time
Panel Abstract:

**Beyond the Historic Turn: Toward an Anthropology of History**

Sometime in the 1980s anthropology took the “historic turn”. Since then, anthropologists have come routinely to incorporate a historical perspective into ethnography. After the long reign of functionalism the discipline began to plough through paradigms at increasing speed and the realization of its own historical dynamics paralleled the discovery of dynamism in world societies. As anthropology came of age it began to critique its own knowledge and models some of which were consistent with colonialism. Yet anthropology took the historic turn without systematically questioning the applicability of common sense ideas of “history”. This panel now calls for a further step, which involves moving from a historically minded anthropology to the anthropological investigation of practices analogous to, and including, our own contemporary conception of, “the field of the historical” and the production of knowledge about it: The Anthropology of History.

At this point we have a number of ethnographies of local conceptions of the past in its relation to the present, and even some empirical accounts of Western forms of establishing “past relationships”. Yet few attempts have been made to develop analytical frameworks that do not (at least implicitly) privilege contemporary Western “historicism” as the (seemingly “culture-free”) vantage point from which to assess forms of historical thinking and praxis. Indeed, by exempting from analysis the assumptions underlying Western academic historiography (such as rational procedure, objectivity, empirical verification, linear temporality, and strictures against anachronism) anthropologists may well be said to have unwittingly contributed to the ideological universalization of a set of normative criteria for authorizing “histories” that, even in their European context of origin date back little more than two centuries. In contrast to such anthropological contraband trade in what Michel-Rolph Trouillot has called “North Atlantic universals,” we seek to open up all forms of past-making to ethnographic inquiry. Forms of knowledge and practice formerly bracketed otherwise (e.g. as “myth”, “legend”, “ritual” or “sacred narrative”) thus now come back into consideration as possible forms of historicization, as do many further practices and modes of “presenting the past”: popular memory, spirit possession, historical fiction, battlefield re-enactments, and ghost stories among others.

Our goal in this panel is to enable the study of the various epistemologies, practices of discovery/research, and modes of communication/representation governing the production of knowledge about the past in human societies. To this end, we will draw together contributions from various subfields and regional traditions in anthropology or adjacent disciplines on topics such as indigenous archaeology, legal battles over competing historicities (e.g. creationism vs. evolution), studies of the diachronic transmission of affect from objects to persons and vice versa, semiotic regimentation of indexicalities in the constitution of “evidence of the past”, canons of metahistorical reflexivity, and conceptions of time and temporality.
Stephan Palmié (University of Chicago) and Charles Stewart (University College London) For an Anthropology of History

We have had history and anthropology, historical anthropology and the history of anthropology, but as yet there has been no concerted anthropology OF history. What is needed, we argue, are coordinated theoretical and ethnographic studies of how the past is known, understood and represented in world societies past and present. As many critics have noted, historicism drives out of circulation what Ashis Nandy calls its non-western “doubles”, as if by some Gresham’s law of epistemological economy. Yet our project does not solely involve appreciating the “others” delegitimated by and subordinated to Western academic historiography. We also need a reverse anthropology where historicism itself along with other Western practices of relating to the past are opened to ethnographic study as forms of historification. These include, inter alia, battlefield re-enactments, consumption of historical fiction or docudramas, contestatory minority visions of the past, collection of memorabilia, ghost hunting or recreational genomics. Ethnographic studies reveal that such social practices conform only partially, if at all, to the expectations of historicism. Ultimately the philosophers of history have it right: the past and the future are always in the present but in myriad ways according to diverse cultural logics. This presentation will map out some of the key interrogatives for an anthropology of history and open the question of whether heightened recognition of alternative regimes of historicity might alter the Western understanding of history; and if new strategies and representational forms are necessary for capturing non-historicist historicities.

Courtney Handman (Reed College) Borrowed History and Forsaken Identity: On Being Lost in Christian Papua New Guinea

Colonial projects of anthropology and history, as Johannes Fabian argued in Time and the Other, denied that Europe’s Others existed in the same time as the colonizers themselves. This denial of coevalness meant that indigenous people were either granted no history – living simply in a timeless present – or a history that had in some way stopped moving forward towards modernity. In response to Fabian’s critique anthropologists have worked to present historical narratives of the communities in which they work, with the assumption that each community has its own history that needs to be told. It is somewhat discomforting then to realize that not everyone wants to participate in this emancipatory historical-political project. In this paper, I discuss the ways in which Guhu-Samane Christians in Papua New Guinea sometimes refuse to search for their own independent history, and instead find spiritual solace in borrowing the history of others. Specifically, Guhu-Samane Christians focus considerable attention on finding traces within their landscape and language of their descent from the Lost Tribes of Israel. Engaged in local projects of linguistic reconstruction and genealogical re-ordering, local people work to organize the stray icons of an Israelite past into an indexical chain of salvational relatedness. However, this is not simply a project of taking on another’s history, since one of the goals of Lost Tribes discourses is to use it to engage in a moral critique of past and present cultural practices. That is to say, this is history in service not of identity but of (Christian) transformation.
Jonathan Marks (University of North Carolina – Charlotte) How do we combat creationism as anthropologists? With the history of science

Biological anthropologists are in the challenging position of balancing simultaneous responsibilities; first, as custodians of the authoritative scientific narrative of human origins, and second, as professionals obligated to comprehend cultural diversity non-hierarchically. The task is rendered more difficult by scholars in cognate fields who yoke evolution to atheism in the name of modernity, and aggressively evangelize for both. I will argue that there is a very normative anthropological solution to these challenges, and it lies in science studies, and particularly in the history of science. This field has already been strongly influenced by anthropological ideas, although the history of human evolution has not been treated as broadly as the history of general evolutionary biology. I will outline three ways in which history and anthropology have been underutilized in confronting creationism, and suggest ways of incorporating them. First, in elaborating the assumptions of scientific thought. While demarcating science synchronically has proven difficult, the development of evidentiary standards of knowledge in the 17th and 18th centuries can illuminate why creationism is not science. Second, in confronting the theological difficulties in natural theology. To assert that theology has no place in science is to fail to understand the study of nature until its most recent manifestation. Third, in decentering Darwin as an icon of the modern condition. Actually Darwinism was simply one of a series of naturalistic discourses that overtook the sciences in the 19th century. The shift from miraculous to historical explanations can be seen from Jones’s philology at the beginning of the century, through Virchow’s medicine in the middle of the century, to Frazer’s mythology at the end. Indeed, Frazer’s treatment of the gospel story was at least as great a threat to the Biblical literal tradition as was Darwin’s treatment of species.

Webb Keane (University of Michigan) Slow Time: Culture, Materiality, and the Knowability of the Neolithic

In its origins, anthropology was a response not only to the colonial encounter with difference, but also to the discovery of deep time. One dangerous consequence of the convergence of global reach and deep time, of course, was to conflate the two, equating others with ancients. In response, many cultural anthropologists came to confine their claims to an increasingly narrow focus on the very recent past, often resulting in a lack of perspective even on our own condition, a tendency to attribute to modernity either too much novelty, or none at all. This narrowing of focus has worked in coordination with a stress on human capacities for self-invention. Self-invented, human worlds are inherently historical and, by some accounts, incommensurable. If so, then how can we develop an anthropology that fulfills its original promise of breaking out of what can be known from any given position in order to comprehend worlds beyond it? If cultural worlds are produced by human imaginings, over the very long run, the deep temporal perspective offered by archaeology may offer one way to get at how distinct worlds are constituted. But, confined to material data, this approach poses significant challenges of its own. This talk explores possibilities for comparison and the knowledge of deep time by looking at some aspects of evidence from the Anatolian Neolithic and its materiality.
Shannon Dawdy (University of Chicago) *Antique Things and Totemic Aesthetics*
Antiques and heirlooms are objects particularly prone to collective fetishization, with an otherworldly aura reflected in their accumulation of patina – a world prior to the present. Collecting has often been understood simply as a form of conservative nostalgia propping up a delicate class system which also allows emulation and movement within it. Through close ethnography of historic preservationists and antique collectors, we find that there are other, more time-sensitive social understandings being expressed. Preservation and collection are processes through which objects become social beings. Whereas Alfred Gell, Bruno Latour and others have emphasized the being-ness and agency of objects that are independent and quite distinct from those of their human actors, I think this mistakes what is going on. In this case, the agentive or sentimental object – the fetishized antique – stands in for the social stratigraphy and totemic spirit that most human interlocutors otherwise would find too difficult to fathom, agree upon, or explain. It is the living thing that stands in for the dead. To recognize patina – the ghost in the object – is to acknowledge that the objective world pre-existed the viewer's consciousness and, further, that this object world was largely created by other, now unknowable (because dead) consciousness beings. This is a way in which the dead walk among us in the secular world.

Byron Hamann (Ohio State University) *Historicizing Western Historicism, Or, the Anthropology of the Anthropology of History*
At the final session of the Council of Trent in 1563, the Catholic church approved a plan for calendrical reform. It had long been realized that the Julian calendar was slowly drifting away from seasonal alignments, and so a new calendric system was needed to rejoin human and solar cycles. In 1578, Juanelo Turriano published a letter describing this project: *Brief Discourse to his Majesty the Catholic King on the Subject of the Reduction of the Year and the Reform of the Calendar*. When the new papally-approved calendar was put into effect on October 12, 1582, it was initially rejected by Protestants, and so for the next two centuries Europe’s time reckoning took the form of a mosaic of discordant calendars. My paper explores the implications of this temporal anecdote. Not quite a decade ago, historian Frederick Cooper offered a powerful critique against flattening the past 500 years of European expansion into a single hegemonic moment of “European and then Western capitalist modernity after 1492.” This talk engages with Cooper’s ideas by exploring the disjunctive history of Western models of time and social change over the past five centuries. I begin by considering models of “Western time” and “civilization” that have become canonical points of reference in anthropology: the work of Johannes Fabian, Marshall Sahlins, and Michel-Rolph Trouillot. In the second half, I engage with historian Constantin Fasolt’s arguments about the origins and limits of Western academic historiography by focusing on fifteenth- and sixteenth-century models of temporality in Iberia’s transatlantic empire, models that focused on retrogressive reduction.

Richard Handler (University of Virginia) *The Construction of Coincidence*
We understand *coincidence* to mean simultaneous occurrence in space and time, and more particularly, a “concurrence of events” or of people “having no apparent causal connection” (*OED*). The coincidental ostensibly has no narrative structure, although
historians can incorporate coincidence into their narratives. But coincidence is underpinned or staged by modern conceptions of time and space. This paper argues that the cultural staging of coincidence makes it possible to treat coincidence as a causal element in historical narratives. It also makes it possible for individual actors to stage coincidence in order to construct historical narratives more to their liking.

Valentina Napolitano (University of Toronto) Notes on human nature and the power of returns
This intervention engages with the affective forces of histories and the power of returns. Through a psychoanalytical focus on returns, the homely, and the unhomely I explore how long-term Catholic anxieties about human nature are still very much with us - as, for instance, in contemporary processes of transnational migration. In anthropology we are at a moment when 16th century Christian ideas of being naturally kin within the breed of ‘humanity’, while expressing different cultures, have been tested. Hence this paper explores directions beyond what Fabian argued was the inception of an anthropological discipline that embraced a spatial, linear conception of history that powerfully denied the coevalness of Others with imperial Selves. I suggest here one direction for anthropology is to look less for generalizations (a trope that has driven our disciplinary inquiry) to foreground processes of formalization – of taking forms in relations. Through the analysis of ethnographic material on the intersection of the Catholic Church’s teachings on migration and transnational Latin American migration to Rome, I explain how affective returns and the affective sensorium may be good tools to understand the power of desire and anxieties that are at play in the making of histories.

Kristina Wirtz (Western Michigan University) The Living, the Dead, and the Immanent: A Cuban Ontological Journey in Two Acts
A reflexive anthropology of history should not only “excavate” locally relevant projects of past-making but use these ethnographic particulars to highlight and relativize the workings of what Michel-Rolph Trouillot called our scholarly “historicity.” As Stephan Palmié has pointed out, spirits and historians don’t get along, especially when spirits cross ontological realms of “past” and “myth” to intervene in the present, which turns out to be occupied and influenced by the dead and deified as well as the living. Ethnographers, too, may find that their living interlocutors engage and even “live in” the past according to differing modalities of historical consciousness, with consequences for present interactions and future potentialities. Drawing on long-term fieldwork among religious and folklore practitioners in eastern Cuba, I frame these issues as an investigation into the semiotic regimentation of spatiotemporal and ontological orders. I analyze the workings of metapragmatic calibration between two unfolding interactional events (the immanent) and the ontologically distinct realms of the past, the dead, and the deified they evoke. During a Santería ceremony, an oricha takes possession of her devotee to give advice to other participants in a distinctively heteroglossic voice indexing both the history of slavery and the transcendence of African gods, and during a group interview, members of an Afro-Cuban folklore society break into song to achieve a kind of apotheosis uniting them with the Cuban revolutionaries and rebels who eternally fight
for independence. I ask what these cases might reveal about the nomic workings of scholars’ empty, universal, and linear time.

Michael Lambek (University of Toronto) Conducting an Ethnography of History and Writing an Ethnographic History

Anthropology and history are intellectual twins locked in conversation, and sometimes competition, in which it is both impossible not to think historically about anthropology or about particular ethnographic sites or objects AND necessary to think anthropologically about history, both in the abstract and in specific settings. I address these issues in two related but different projects, a work on northwest Madagascar that I call an ethnography of Sakalava history and a work on neighbouring Mayotte that I call an ethnographic history. The former draws on conceptual tools such as chronotope, poiesis of history, historical conscience, and orchestration of voice to unpack how Sakalava conceptualize, perform, live, suffer, and acknowledge their history. The latter sequences several slices of synchronic ethnography collected in the same village and composed by the same ethnographer at several different periods over a 35 year span to produce a diachronic account that is not a historical ethnography (i.e. written in the present about the past and as a continuous narrative) but an ethnographic history (written in a series of presents now past as a discontinuous narrative). In this way, while largely conforming to European notions of linear historical time I also approximate a kind of Sakalava juxtaposition of multiple historical times.