



# Alternate Routes

A Journal of Critical Social Research

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Volume 19, 2003

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## **Editorial Policy/Call For Papers**

*Alternate Routes (AR)* is a refereed multi-disciplinary journal published annually by graduate students in the department of Sociology and Anthropology at Carleton University Ottawa, Canada, K1S 5B6, altroutes@lists.carleton.ca. As a peer reviewed journal, *AR* provides a forum for debate and exchange among North American and International graduate students. We are interested in receiving papers written by graduate students (or coauthored with faculty), regardless of university affiliation.

The editorial emphasis of the journal is on the publication of critical and provocative analyses of theoretical and substantive issues. We welcome papers on a broad range of topics and encourage submissions which advance or challenge theoretical questions and contemporary issues. We also welcome commentaries and reviews of recent publications, works in progress and personal perspectives.

*Alternate Routes* is currently seeking submissions for Volume 20, 2004. Papers should be submitted double-spaced and in triplicate, following the American Psychological Association (APA) referencing system, keeping endnotes to a minimum. Please see our website for a style-guide.

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*Alternate Routes* is indexed in *Sociological Abstracts* and the *Left Index*.

The *Alternate Routes* Collective gratefully acknowledge the financial assistance of the Carleton University community; the Departments of Sociology and Anthropology and its Chair; the Dean of Arts and Social Sciences; the Dean of Graduate Studies and Research; and the Vice-President of Research. We also wish to gratefully thank all of the anonymous reviewers.

## Perspective

# Talk of Inventing Tradition: Sketching Limitations of Anthropological Concepts of Culture

Brian P. Miller

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### *Introduction: On a Cultural Approach*

As an adolescent, 'culture' was always something to possess. Together, my family could walk out the door, hop in the Pontiac or Buick, and drive off to experience culture. We could visit the cultural center - the museum, the theatre, the cinema, the art gallery; we could tour a cultural site - a historic mansion, a battlefield, a realistically reconstructed colonial, or native settlement; we could even attend a cultural event - the St. Patrick's Day, or July Fourth Parade, the Greek or German festival. My family could venture anywhere but home to find culture. It was out in society and absent in the neighborhood. The artist's object, the symphony performance, even the refined dinner experience was a means to ascertain the culture just downtown a few minutes drive. Culture found its way into my life through the relocation of my body to designated areas where culture was contained, erected, even illustrated, for my gaze and absorption, rearranging my perceptions and awareness, and readying me for a specific kind of experience.

Naïve at best, simple at least, culture was materialistic and experienced in certain interactions with others. Holy describes these elements of "high culture" as ways in which shared meanings help to make sense of a world that constantly changes<sup>1</sup>. Never did it occur to me that culture might be an omnipresent force, a fluid, ebbing movement of perceptions and definitions, a point of contention, even argument... politically, a tool for negotiation, a system of reinvention or a shifting, limited concept of differentiation... a context for understanding. Numerous travels, global encounters, and, not the least, several years of academic anthropology have razed these adolescent definitions, or maybe just reconstructed

them. This paper focuses on the various dimensions and contentions the concept of *culture* brings to anthropology.

The term is a functional and constructive idiom of language, not limited to academic departments in the social sciences of the Western Hemisphere. People give culture meaning through how they use and refer to it. Ambiguity surrounds the margins of the culture concept and anthropology debates these notions as a matter of practice. As an element of the human being's social atmosphere, culture now lacks clarity even within the discipline of anthropology, having undergone a critical rethinking in the last twenty-five years. In attempting to reconcile the notion of culture and its multitude of meanings, its outline is less clear. The effervescence of the presence and significance of *culture* in the academy does not negate but diminishes embarrassment for my former notions when popular discourse still clings to similar, material definitions as those I once used. Understanding culture as a mode of interpretation and representation depends on context, conversation, and the audience of these two elements. It is not beyond an individual to watch a film where men perform "the monkey chant" in a jungle in Southeast Asia and gain insight into another culture, see that as something distinct from their own. The frontiers of understanding create boundaries for the knowing of the idea itself, though not rigid. The word *culture* is supposed to have perimeters; it functions with difference in mind.

### *Limiting Anthropology*

Perhaps the suggestion that the identity of culture lie in the material aspects of my hometown was not entirely naïve; rather, the context of using the term culture to construct this meaning limited other possibilities. The materialist definition was a valid description. In *Culture in Practice*, Marshall Sahlins illustrates, with slight disdain for this value, "for too many, 'culture' still has this predominantly aesthetic or intellectual signification (2000:16)." His obvious point states that culture is more than the epitomized material expressions of society - more than the museums and intellectualized, institutionalized, elitist version. It comes from anthropological frameworks and not the day-to-day, popular, lived conception that he acknowledges. Even in contemporary discussions of culture, especially regarding authentic and invented traditions, the characteristics of a web of meanings are made obvious, illustrative, and interesting through reference to site-specific rituals,

craft, language, and other, outwardly visible aesthetic products; expressive *culture* helps to differentiate. It is easy to glean from Sahlins' words here that anthropology has its own model and use for *culture* that it tends to continually try to renegotiate. Yet anthropology, and in particular its hallmark methodology of ethnography, has played a part in Western intellectualism by reinforcing modernist ideas about what gets identified as a cultural item.

What is worth consideration are the limitations of the anthropological treatment of the culture concept. The definitions and uses anthropology gives to the idea fluctuate too much, hovering just above comprehension, offering the inadequate guarantee of a definitive way to talk about the essence of culture. Employing the idea of culture as a way to delineate differences between groups of people does not allow room in an academic discourse for those groups to alter their own identity. A discursive fence prevents them from getting on with the process of sustaining and formulating meaning in their lives, bartering knowledge of the world with those who they see as lying beyond an imagined boundary.

The very tension of continually calling to question and the redrawing of lines has been the subject of poignant investigations seen recently in the works of *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus, 1986) and *Recapturing Anthropology* (Fox, 1991), as well as postmodernist, and afterological<sup>2</sup> thought. Though distinct approaches, their questions are real and warranted. Anthropologists have exerted - in fact, an entire discipline and discourse found - over the central idea that culture (or something dubbed as culture) is alive between, among, and through people. What is being asked is whether culture does have substance and how it is and can be defined and by whom? Is culture, as an empirical model, valuable? Is the "very emphasis on 'culture'... a betrayal" and misnomer for the complexities of human communication and behavior (Ingold, 1996:119)? Anthropology, from its conception and as a vehicle for study and debate, is so wrapped up in the project of modernity, that its constant self-critique, internal uncertainty, moral consciousness, and historical change, embody the modernist spirit of progress: takedown the old, build the new, rejoice, remit, renew. Nevertheless, these conventions are dependent on the morality of each era and anthropology is constantly at arms with itself in the face of changing concerns and timely issues. Negotiations of culture not only appear to occur in the global world of struggling, sentient, social forces but are also a mechanism of

the intellectual direction of the anthropological approach to understanding: to create a perception of meaning within human worlds.

Returning to Marshal Sahlins', I had a chuckle reading "Two Or Three Things I Know About Culture" when he wrote:

It is possible to conclude from several decades of disciplinary self-reflection that anthropology doesn't exist, since if it isn't sociology, it's humanities. Alternatively, it is reassuring to know that anthropologists are able to share with the peoples they study the ability to construct ethnic differences by developing epitomizing contrasts of selected cultural values (Sahlins, 1999:400).

I wish to make clear that this was an eighteen page, "anthropological" paper in an "anthropological" journal. Anthropology does exist, just not as he had construed. Sahlins' demonstration of displacement summarizes the condition anthropology realizes itself in today - questioning its past, reassessing and evaluating its impressions and descriptions. The human being, as a mode of representation, no longer holds authority in the realm of science. Even anthropology has begun questioning the validity of scientific truth, its offerings to the human world, and its relationship to upholding the foundations of a problematic, colossal hegemony. A new anthropologists' creed might be offered, "I am not an instrument of objective measurement." Leaving the domain and genre of enlightened, empirical inquiry, Sahlins evokes a movement towards a discipline grounded in moral ingenuity. The inability to poise and sidle itself firmly in an academic category, wavering in empirical sensibility, reflects silent incongruities as well as resonating modernist elements of disconnection. Anthropology's self-prescribed role as purveyor of truth in Western society has changed: its legitimacy, debunked. Linked admittedly and forthrightly to a colonial project of domination since at least the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, anthropologists have run headfirst into a quagmire of morality and self-awareness, stimulating concerns of its effectiveness. In an idealistic, Western democratic sense of freedom and humanity - meaning, making way for the right of all humans to make their own decisions and choices, to live without oppression and violence from others - anthropology has become highly critical and sensitive to its role in politics and as an author of knowledge.

Conceivably, a residual guilt coats a professional conscience focused, in the last twenty or more years, on post colonialist (or late-imperialist, or high-imperialist) underpinnings. As a focus of debate, anthropology's own internal strife has muddled its definitions and reality of culture. Maybe this social and scholastic climate of over sensitivity to the contemporary world condition of globalization, the capitalist world market, hyper-cautious political positioning, and the introduction of *Western* philosophical ideals into every niche of human communities around the globe have deconstructed an anthropological understanding of itself and simultaneously dug a moat, an unapproachable bastion, with anthropology in the center. Its own constructed tradition has marginalized its self-worth, making it difficult to approach and to venture out into new understanding. In a gesture to support Marshal Sahlins, for I find agreement in much of his writing, he does correspond to the idea of ideological and practical toil. "Modern anthropology still struggles with what had seemed like Enlightenment to the philosophers of the eighteenth century but turned out to be a parochial self-consciousness of European expansion and the *mission civilisatrice*" (Sahlins, 2000:501). Civilization simply referred to the society in which the philosophers of that time lived; civilization was a concept and model, hierarchical to barbarism, a stage beyond savage primitivism to which, paraphrasing Kant, Sahlins (2000) writes, progress and reason would overcome.

Returning, however, to another point about Marshall Sahlins' statement from "Two or Three Things," his comments allows, for no apparent reason, for anthropology to shake hands with itself for having the ability to make similar distinctions based on research in some locale that categorizes others through quintessential characteristics of difference. But at this stage in departure, making distinctions about the "world out there" and "other" people seems a universal characteristic of the human experience. The brain of an individual inherently creates differences of self and not-self and this procedure is played out on a grand scale in the social world of humans. This faculty does not confer, outside of situated knowledge, a truth about where lines ought to be drawn, or who is to decide what prevails as a boundary. The discipline of anthropology is consciously entwined with political manoeuvres and negotiations, but why should anthropology be a better judge or negotiator of culture? One answer is that in a Western society, it is the institutional intellectuals

who produce identities for its constituents. This "position" that, in general:

. . . The anthropologist's intervention will be meaningful in terms of [resolving culture conflict and dynamics of domination]" or that s/he "can judge what is beneficial or 'environmentally sound' and what is not," based on familiarity with the location and knowledge of cultural values, is taken for granted (Escobar, 1995:669).

This perspective seems positioned in a Western notion of power (though, also, a particular kind of negotiation). "Anthropologists need to be aware of the different ways - and the different social and political contexts - in which anthropological ideas and concepts are used by non-anthropologists" (Ahmed and Shore, 1995:31). As I was saying, the Guggenheim is as much a cultural characteristic as the theory of commodity culture. It represents specific aspects of, in this case, art, architecture, and aesthetics of the twentieth century. The commodity, culture, is traded between forces. Culture then, implied from Sahlins' nod, is essentially the process of a group of people agreeing on shared similarities while creating differentiation from another group who is involved in an analogous practice. Yet it also encompasses the manifested, even physical, symbols of which these groups identify with. Both institute differences, enduring or not.

***"Take I: Make of it what you will"***

Eric Wolf (1994) asserts, en route towards considering the nature of culture as a global positioning device:

Culture...has a societal background, and that background has implications for how we conceptualize and use [it]. I think of ideas as 'takes' on the phenomena of this world and as instructions about how to combine these takes to ascertain their connections or, contrariwise, to hold them as apart, to beware of asserting linkages as false. I also think that particular takes are prompted by background conditions and limited by these conditions (1994:2).

It is important to point out that Wolf's paper talks about *what* the concept, culture, allows us to think and *how* it allows us to think. Without trying to be redundant, or simple, realizing that culture takes on different meanings within different social contexts is a critical link to understanding the limitations that talking about culture runs into. It is an illusion to see the term as possessing universality. Many "takes" differ from the obstinacy of anthropological "takes."

Anthropology has developed its own history of the world, including the writing of the history of the present. This conceit, somewhat radically, imposed itself on the Western world with its refined order of facts and findings. Lingering within this paradigm, discursive anthropology in the twenty-first century tends to ignore its own placement in the fashioned epoch and its constructed, ideological networks that are themselves "passing through a phase in global history." (Ahmed and Shore, 1995:32). Grimshaw and Hart decide that "established forms [of modern anthropology], both concepts and practices, no longer seem adequate for engaging with the shifting complexity of contemporary society (Grimshaw and Hart, 1995:60)." When the paradigmatic grounds for the relationship between inquiry and understanding have been excavated, anthropology cannot continue producing the kind of knowledge to which it is accustomed. Its correlation to Enlightened, modern motifs and motives prohibit talking about human communities without implying progressive social models and cultural distancing through a silent, hierarchical self-image. Moreover, anthropology's inherent reticence questions its own values. It is the modern lament, evident in Sahlin's statement about anthropology's "parochial self-consciousness." In a perceptual world of categorized knowledge and institutionalized intellectualism, the broadening, fantastic world of Western European imperialism around the globe, principally, its encounters with "new" peoples, lead the way for the emergence of an understanding of these experiences through a logical system of symbols by which to order their lives. Anthropology introduced new meanings to new experiences through the fabric of science, a means familiar to its own, native social production of knowledge.

When anthropologists begin asking themselves, "who belongs to culture, and to whom does a 'culture' belong? Who can-and ought to - study and preserve it" (Jackson, 1995:17), they realize the schism, often overlooked in anthropological research. Jackson suggests that culture is

“something dynamic, something that people use to adapt to changing social conditions - and as something that is adapted in turn - [here] we have a more serviceable sense of how culture operates over time, particularly in situations demanding rapid change (Jackson, 1995:18).

In this definition, reliant on the context of communities of people struggling for identity and differentiation from each other, culture rests at the margins of daily, social existence where negotiations of a political nature are more alive than the perpetuation of a status quo (unless, of course, the struggle is the status quo). Jackson gives the impression that culture is a collective will and momentum. Here, there is a type of cultural understanding that is relevant to the use of the term in a socially expressive context: people outwardly contesting their identity. However, in the status quo a certain mechanics of perpetuating and living out differences is a daily activity. *Culture* becomes functional, malleable, and manipulative. This may only be true in part because when culture is debated in this manner what is occurring is an expressiveness of particular circumstances. Cultural systems become more apparent when conceived of in relation to another, when they disclose “their properties by the way they respond to diverse circumstances, organizing those circumstances in specific forms and, in the event, changing their forms in specific ways (Sahlins, 2000:499).” What is being alluded to is the utilization of existing cultural characteristics, mostly epitomized, to reconstruct identity in the face of changing social contexts and conditions: inventing culture.

Okay, so I brought it out in the open. The very mention of the idea that culture is “contrived” gets eyes rolling and deep sighs among anthropologists. What makes culture authentic? What does it mean to invent a culture? In addition, what tradition is not? Globalization, through the imposition of a world economic system, has made these questions highly volatile. Anthropologists have been discussing them for nearly half a century in various forms. *Culture* has taken on new meanings as people wrestle with ways to retain identity and value in the context of rapid social bombardment and change. Nevertheless, can we say this is a modern phenomenon?

Recently, these issues and the writing on them have had to do with the after effects of colonial encounters and the ways in which *other* cultures (other than the ones the anthropologists represented) adapted, or incorporated, or handled the new experiences introduced by the “West.”

These societies, often perceived of as in need of civilization, proceeded to redefine themselves under the newly revamped conditions of their lives. Marshall Sahlins remarks about existing academic interpretations of the traditional culture myth that it is itself situated:

Too many anthropologists say that the so-called traditions the people are flaunting are not much more than serviceable humbuggery. They are 'invented traditions', fabricated with an eye politic to the present situation. Signs of a supposed indigeneity and antiquity, the stories actually owe their substance as well as their existence to the Western capitalist cultures they would thus defy (1999:402).

As much as they would like to concede, the culture to which the anthropologists are linked have fashioned their own traditions in direct relation to these pretentious beliefs, and thus distinctiveness, through their own form of "serviceable humbuggery." Saying that there is such a thing as an invented tradition is itself an invented tradition. It is a method of differentiation. Anthropology and Western society owe as much to the *primitive* world for giving them a sense of identity as the natives do to Europeans for teaching them about their own noble savagism.

The academy claimed legitimacy in declaring and measuring authenticity in the name of scientific evidence, in the name of its encounter and influence on the people. Europeans never dreamt that the native had had an impact on their way of thinking. "Western social science consistently repositions itself as the originary point of comparative and generalizing theory" (Moore, 1996:3). Talk of inventing a tradition.<sup>3</sup> Inventiveness on the part of the "native" was rationalized by declaring that the absorption of Europeanisms, be it goods, or religion, or the reconfiguration of local customs, was indication of inauthentic culture. This perspective harks back to a predominant, underlying premise of modern progressive thought that alleged what was not Western was not civilized and thus timeless, inert, and in need of transformation. Simple dictionary definitions clarifying the term, invent, state that to do so is "to devise by thinking; to produce for the first time through the use of the imagination or of ingenious thinking and experiment" (Merriam-Webster Online). Learning to adapt and respond is not only a characteristic of the individual but

of a body of individuals, living together through similar perceptions. Inventiveness is a built-in instrument for cultural liveliness.

*Ding An Sich (the thing itself)*

Anthropologists in the contemporary scene investigate similar ideas about social ingenuity on the global stage. As the global village develops and various cultures concede to a world economic market, anthropologists have been addressing the notion of homogeneity *et al.* global hegemony. This is the assertion that there subsists a common structure and vocabulary, or knowledge that all peoples (cultures) will understand and make meaningful their participation in this macro-network. This seems somewhat bleak. The argument against such plans demonstrates a connective, working, symbiotic relationship between the local and the global where invention is necessary because the source and motivation for cultural distinctiveness is cradled in shared diversity. Communities are using symbolic characteristics to formulate their identity, to specify what is particular about *their* culture. A central property of capitalist democracy is the flourishing of variety and endless image making. The twentieth century has seen this process repeatedly with flourishing nationalist movements across the globe. Essentially, what is most valuable within a common social perception is being heralded as quintessential to that order creating subtle differences between communities. The concept of *culture* is a positional tool.

Here, the association with one or another cultures is significant in that cohesiveness is formed in a way particular to the human capacity for order. I think an important factor in considering any discussion of the use of culture is, as stated earlier, how *culture* provides us with the ability to have meaningful lives. Tim Ingold, in his 1996 edited volume, *Key Debates in Anthropology*, documents a deliberation on just that topic. I will not reiterate what the debate, "Human worlds are culturally constructed," says and decides, but I would like to state that the debate centered on the human being's facility to experience and perceive the *world out there*. Reflection of the social and cultural as a natural, instinctive, inherent (call it what you like) ability of the human species is often glossed over in understanding social and cultural order and definitions. Our ability to apply meaning to an objectified experience of the world too often elevates these systems to practices beyond what we deem as *natural*. A *constructed world* is solely within the human realm

of perception. It is how we think of our engagement with what we call an environment. When Roland Littlewood explains that to believe that culture is not a constructed event “is to suggest that we can really experience the world out there *as it is*,” he offers only part of the equation (1996: 122). He attends that we are the creators of the blocks with which we assemble our perceptual and real worlds, and “we determine our experience of it, our human world (122).” He is implying that culture is the only way we come to understand the world. His implications, though, lack an actual material reality. The part he has right is that human experience allows us to create (or think we create) meanings, such as what is cultural, to live out and to receive back from through interaction. The event is not so much a construction as it is a simultaneous creation and exhibition of the encounter with a projected significance of the world out there, as it is. “Truth is the confirmation of Appearance to Reality (Whitehead, 1933: 241).”

In this sense, people live out their lives in the world with an “irreducibly cultural character” because this experience of culture shapes the capacity to understand (James, 1996: 105). I do not see the dichotomy, or reciprocity, that Tim Ingold derives of the difference between living in a culturally constructed world and in a world where we humans are simply engaged. I see the lived experience as a unity of both, a dependence on both because people are able to disengage from their perceived worlds, and through the process of perception, the perceiver (the product) unites with this world through the capacity to formulate significance within it. Perception, then, is more than a mode of engagement; it creates meaning that conceives an image of the world for the perceiver. Perception is the world out there and within. In the end, what both sides of the debate were arguing for is the magnitude that culture, not as a word but as an idea, has on the contexts of human life, both as a perception and as an interpreter of perception. Culture is a means of engagement and reflection with ourselves in the world.

### *Conclusion: Res Cogitans; Res Extensa*

Each endeavor to understand humankind works with a set of characteristic ideas that orient its inquiries and justify its

existence, and for anthropology ideas about...culture...have played that guiding and legitimizing role (Wolf, 1994:1).

I have not endeavored to dilute the potency of the culture concept; I wanted to highlight that there are limitations on anthropological capacities for understandings of it. My reminiscence of childhood perceptions is what got the wheels rolling on how culture is not just anthropology's contribution. The concept was not only physically manifest in my geography but it was the "expressive and customary means by which [my social constructs were] maintained" (Sahlins, 2000:15). In Western society (and plausibly others), despite resistance to this reality, culture still relates to these customary artifacts similar to those found in the societies that anthropologist study. "Cultures are not static," Jackson purports, they appropriate the possibility *culture* affords, and are not "homogeneous systems on which change is imposed. Rather, cultures are systems whose very foundations are characterized by dynamism, negotiation, and contestation" (Jackson, 1995:20).

The networked brain of anthropology has propagated perceptions that are familiar to it. Culture concepts are strong and embedded in discourse and meaning. Theory and discipline fill the synapses, allowing a re-experiencing of the *anthropological*, as if there is an embodied response to approaching the world through its practice. Postmodernists would clap their hands at me for saying anthropology seems to be in a state of fragmentation. However, I am suggesting that anthropology is on a threshold, only frozen there, confused and too self-conscious to begin a new approach to a world that has out grown its vision. Appadurai offers his views on new understanding and approaches in referring to a "global ethnoscape" (1991). In the new design, anthropologists must admit the "dilemmas of perspective and representation" and the effects this plays on representation while also focusing on the historical problems of the twenty-first century (1991:191). He concludes, saying, "...it seems advisable to treat the present historical moment and use our understanding of it to illuminate and guide the formulation of historical problems (1991:208)." Appadurai is calling for a type of objectivity that aims at the depiction of critical and moral issues among ever increasing, transnational identities. The subject of culture needs addressing, when and

where people are confronting differences on their own terms and not those envisioned by the anthropologist.

Anthropology is about representing notions of the time, specifically, with clear contexts and boundaries in mind. Anthropology of “ethnoscapes” reflects this thought. This is the culture it comes out of and *culture* is the context that creates meaning. It represents the objectives, morality, and politics of its time. Still, culture is not an exclusive circumstance to anthropology, not anymore. Anthropology as a disciplined way of creating meaning in the world needs to rediscover value in its process while realizing that culture, in its various contexts, is itself about assigning values. “Anthropology has been predicated on maintaining clear boundaries between self and other,” (Escobar, 1992:381) and for myself, these boundaries are what make anthropology a worthwhile exploration; they make anthropology a significant device to negotiate and discover shared understandings. What coexists with this significance is setting out “to question the productivity of the culture concept” in every situation (Escobar, 1992:381). Difference exists; culture is one way it can and “essentialized descriptions are not the platonic fantasies of anthropologists alone; they are general cultural conditions of human perception and communication” (Sahlins, 2000:499). The traditions of anthropology are in the throes of new experience. The devices by which people and anthropologists gauge the acceptability of change are no longer capable of explaining and ordering the perceived world out there.<sup>4</sup> It may be optimistic, but it is time to move ahead and invent some new traditions.

*“SO PRETTY SOON EVERYONE WILL HAVE A CULTURE;  
ONLY THE ANTHROPOLOGISTS WILL DOUBT IT”<sup>5</sup>*

### *Notes*

1.Ladislav Holy, (1996: 12.)

2.Sahlins refers to Brightman (1995): ‘afterology.’ “Two or Three Things I Know about Culture.” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 5 (3): 399-421.

3.Marshall Sahlins (1999). “Two or Three Things I Know About Culture.” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 5 (3): 399-421.

- 4.Regarding Sahlins' remark referencing Lamont Lindstrom (1982:316-29) in *Culture in Practice* (2000). New York: Zone Books.
- 5.Marshall Sahlins (1999). "Two or Three Things I Know About Culture." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 5 (3): 399-421.

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