

Poignant obituary (AT36,3)

‘Perhaps’, Edwards writes in her obituary of Roslyn Poignant, her work ‘never quite got the recognition it deserved in either anthropology or history’. As I wrote, in reviewing *Professional savages: Captive lives and Western spectacle* for the *JRAI* (Benthall 2005), ‘in contrast with the self-importance of some “reflexive” writing, she understates her own role and it is only digging deep into the text that reveals how much she has been personally haunted by a sense of duty’ to the previously forgotten lives of the Australian Aborigines who were virtually enslaved by travelling showmen, and also to those of their descendants. The rigour and sophistication of this book, as well as the almost operatic story of Tambo’s discovery and homecoming, will surely give it a lasting readership.

The landmark book *Anthropology and photography, 1860-1920* (Edwards 1992), based mainly on the RAI collections and brilliantly edited by Elizabeth Edwards, was made possible by years of devoted attention to the collections by Axel Poignant (whose obituary appeared in AT 2[2]: 22) and Roslyn. The project was originally entitled ‘The colonial viewfinder’ but ran into serious administrative problems until providentially saved by Edwards.

Tracing back the history of this way of looking at ethnographic photographs, so innovative at the time, I recall an extremely stimulating workshop held at Queen Elizabeth House in Oxford on 12 May 1984, ‘Visual documentation: Images of colonized peoples’, sponsored by the History Workshop and Centre for Social History. The art historian Linda Nochlin gave a presentation, following her 1983 essay ‘The imaginary Orient’ (Nochlin 1983). I can find no published record of this workshop anywhere, but it deserves a place in the history of the ‘crisis of representation’ which changed anthropology in the 1980s, and maybe a memory or record of it survives somewhere? ●

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Oh crisis! – What crisis?

Travelling to Buenos Aires for a field trip in mid-February, Covid-19 haunted me. Still having a cold, I was aware that if I were to cough, my fellow passengers would shy away from me – thus I packed cough-suppressing drops. Growing up in Germany, due to my appearance, I’d learnt to pay attention to people moving away from me, either physically – fear of being robbed? – or by othering.

Meeting with interlocutors in the field, many of whom I’d known for years, I didn’t notice any distancing. Covid-19 was far away. At most, I was asked how it was affecting Europe; but none, so it seemed, checked whether I was infected. During a call to Delia Giovanola – co-founder of Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, a human rights non-governmental organization struggling to find ‘disappeared’ grandchildren during the last dictatorship (1976-1983) – I coughed. ‘*Vos no sos muy romano*’, she responded. Ignorant of this idiomatic expression meaning ‘you’re not in good health’, I thought to myself: ‘Is she worried? Asking me to deny being Roman, thus Italian, the first European country hit hard by Covid-19?’ She seemed to sense my insecurity, however, and immediately explained her comment.

After the arrival of my wife and daughter a week later, Covid-19 narratives from Europe were retold. These had become martial, including allusions to WWII. Though the local media coverage of Covid-19 was rising, we kept meeting Argentinians until our early departure. In my last interview in mid-March, a former ‘disappeared’ grandchild kissed my cheek and hugged me goodbye, despite having talked about social distancing just before. Going to the airport, we told the taxi driver our worries about life in Germany, as schools were closed etc. He responded that the Covid-19 hype will end soon, adding that ‘we’ are being harassed by a crisis on a two-week cycle. Before Covid-19, it was *la Gripe A* and suchlike.

He reminded me of a *porteña* I’d talked to in 2008. In her craft shop, I asked her about Argentina’s crisis of 2001. She spoke about economic and political meltdowns, about chaos, riots and new forms of sociality like *asambleas*. But, finally, she stressed that 2001 wasn’t unique, as Argentinians live in a constant state of crisis. In 1989, for instance, she’d had to change the prices in her father’s shop three times a day. Now I’m told people attempt social distancing, and yet the cramped queues of elderly and poor people trying to obtain pensions and social benefits on Friday 3 April resembled those of 2001.

The state of emergency in the West, the state of – well, another crisis in Argentina, evokes Walter Benjamin’s (1968: 257) insight gained during the beginning of WWII that the state of emergency ‘is not the exception but the rule’, demanding ‘a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight’. Eighty years later, it looks like we still need to spread the word in the West that ‘our’ crisis is the latest appearance of an ongoing state of emergency, worldwide. ●

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ERRATUM

In relation to Elizabeth Edwards’ obituary of **Roslyn Poignant** in AT 36(2), please read ‘**inimitable**’ for ‘**inimical**’ in ‘**inimical intellectual path**’.

The following two corrections are reported for the **pre-field training workshop** review in AT 36(3): Maureen **Freed** (not Heed), and Isobel Gibbin was **Co-Chair** with the above. [GH]

MAGICAL THINKING AND COVID-19

Anthropologist **Hugh Gusterson** wrote on the *Sapiens* blog how different forms of **magical thinking** are deployed by the US American public in order to deal with the Covid-19 crisis. According to Gusterson, people turn to magic when they feel powerless, a human practice that has been axiomatic in anthropology since its beginnings in the early 20th century. Magical thinking comes in many flavours, from ‘war medicine’ believed to help the **Maji Maji rebellion** drive German colonialists out of Tanzania to the use of magical objects such as talismans. The current Covid-19 pandemic has led people around the world to yet again turn to magic and conspiracy theories. Rumours in **Sri Lanka** suggest that only **white handkerchiefs** protect people from Covid-19, while in parts of **China**, the magical cure for the disease is believed to be **salt water**. There are many examples around the world, but in the US in particular, magical thinking appears to manifest itself in two varieties: the explicitly magical and the pseudoscientific. Perhaps the most striking example has been that of **US President Donald Trump**, who on many occasions co-opted the language of medical research when he praised the malaria drug **hydroxy-chloroquine**. <https://www.sapiens.org/column/conflicted/covid-19-magic/>. [MK]

MUSEUMS AND BLACK LIVES MATTER

In a recent article on the *BBC News* website, Will Gompertz notes how the **culture of British museums** is about to change following the recent **Black Lives Matter protests**. While many museums have expressed solidarity with the global movement, it remains unclear how this translates into a concrete reckoning of Britain’s colonial past and the role of museums within it. **Dan Hicks**, a senior curator at the **Pitt Rivers Museum** in Oxford, who oversees an anthropological collection of around 600,000 objects from all around the world, is a leading voice among museum professionals **calling for the return of contested cultural objects** that are currently part of many of the UK’s national and municipal museums. Anthropological collections from Africa have come under particular scrutiny; as many objects have been taken as trophies of war, their display reinforces institutional racism and white supremacy. However, the idea of returning the Benin Bronzes to Nigeria, for example, does not appeal to the director of the British Museum **Hartwig Fischer**. But the influence of the Black Lives Matter movement goes beyond contested cultural objects. **Sara Wajid**, head of engagement at the **Museum of London** and a member of **Museum Detox**, points out that there is very **little diversity in senior positions** in the UK’s cultural institutions and changing this should be the first step towards a **decolonized**