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REMEMBERING CLAUDE LÉVI-STRAUSS

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The passing of Claude Lévi-Strauss at age 100 on October 30, 2009, bookends but hardly finishes what can only be called one of anthropology's richest and most complex intellectual biographies and legacies.

Descended from a Belgian Jewish family of accomplished artists and intellectuals, Lévi-Strauss originally chose philosophy as his principal area of formation. But disenchantment led to anthropology, where he found the material for both empirical and theoretical answers to the poverty of the evolutionary moralism he found so stifling in 1920s and 1930s French intellectual discourses. This was also part of the background to his 1935 position at the University of São Paulo and then his resignation four years later so he could do more fieldwork among the indigenous peoples of the Mato Grosso and Brazilian Amazon.

Upon his return to Paris as the war came on, the persecution of Jews in Vichy France led to a difficult 1941 escape and move to New York, where, a year later, he took a post at the New School for Social Research. Staying in the US until 1948, he worked later as cultural attaché to the French embassy in Washington. On returning to Paris, Lévi-Strauss served as assistant director of the Musée de l'Homme, 1949–1950, and director of studies in anthropology at the École Pratique des Hautes Études, 1950–1974. In 1959 he was elected to a chair of social anthropology at the Collège de France, and in 1960 he founded *L'Homme,* now the key French anthropology journal. In 1973 he was elected to the Académie Française.

"Structural" anthropology or "structuralism," the rubrics most associated with Lévi-Strauss, date directly to his period in the US, particularly under the influence of linguistic theories from an amalgam of Franz Boas, Ferdinand de Saussure, Leonard Bloomfield, and Edward Sapir, but most particularly his New School colleague Roman Jakobson. The focus was on the structuring of information, the

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nature of its combinatorial packaging and repackaging, the systemic creativity of mental operations, and the logics underlying cultural productions ordered beneath the surfaces of consciousness. These principles of organization that underlie material and expressive cultural forms in the Americas were, Lévi-Strauss argued, a simultaneous treatise on the universal character of mental activity.

Lévi-Strauss's structural analyses imagined anthropology as a crossroads between cognitive and historical science. Like Boas in *The Mind of Primitive Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1911), he wanted to reveal and validate the richness and rigor of indigenous creative imagination, an impulse that led him to work deeply on Amerindian kinship and art, but most closely on myths, the subject of his four-volume magnum opus, *Mythologiques* (1964–1971).

Lévi-Strauss analyzed myths with a creative rigor that takes them as philosophical parables, as a kind of speculation on the condition of life's origins and workings, as forms that develop and display a mind and momentum of their own. This emphasis on the power of myth to see into the interconnected ordering of things also led to a kind of countercultural recognition in the 1970s environmental movement, parallel to the recognition of Gregory Bateson's "ecology of mind."

Lévi-Strauss's work on myths also spoke to and furthered his preference for privileging collectively "anonymous" or "unauthored" forms of creativity. As with his rants against philosophical assumptions about progress, he was likewise antagonistic to philosophical adulation of individuality and individualism, and he devoted a critical part of *The Savage Mind* (1962) to a vigorous attack against Sartre's position on choice. This book is also the pinnacle of a critical anthropological alignment of Levi-Strauss's work not just with Boas (note the parallel titles) but with the philosophical theories of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, a personal intellectual hero whose portraits long sat doubly on his desk, one facing the visitor's chair, one facing his own.

Pessimistic in his views not just about "progress" but about "civilization" dead or alive, as witnessed in the merger of memoir, philosophy, anthropology, and cultural critique in his 1955 *Tristes Tropiques,* Lévi-Strauss was generally experienced by those around him as private, soft-spoken, understated, and simply happiest behind the closed doors of a roomful of early ethnological books and reports. Nevertheless, he was also known to take students and younger colleagues quite seriously. When, in 1984, the University of Pennsylvania asked him to comment on my tenure dossier, with no expectation whatsoever that they would ever hear from him, he quickly dispatched a four-sentence handwritten note, its brevity matched by low-key generosity.

Like Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Foucault, Derrida, or Barthes, Lévi-Strauss's ideas were, rather uniquely for anthropology, taken up far and wide across the humanities and social sciences. Mostly skeptical about what he found fanciful or shoddy in applications of his ideas in the hands of literary theorists, political polemicists, and ideologues, he preferred to simply keep doing his work rather than engage in what might be seen as acts of intellectual policing or one-upmanship.

Apart from the breadth and depth of Lévi-Strauss's intellectual legacy, a certain story will always signal his own mythic stature at the site of American anthropology's across-the-Atlantic embrace. On December 22, 1942, as they

lunched at the Columbia University Faculty Club, a 92-year-old Franz Boas suffered cardiac arrest and slumped, dead, into the arms of Lévi-Strauss, then almost 60 years his junior. Lévi-Strauss always centered the narrative of his New York years on this dramatic incident, along with the company of Boas, Jakobson, and the city's art and intellectual treasures. This was the most influential time of his life, the period that led, on his return to France, to the publication in 1947 of *The Elementary Structures of Kinship,* still his most formidable contribution to technical anthropology.

But there's another cross-cutting story here. One year before Boas' death, the Emergency Committee in Aid of Displaced Scholars, with Boas' support, had tried to place Lévi-Strauss in the Department of Anthropology at the University of New Mexico. In January 1942, Professor Donald D. Brand, then department chair, replied to the application from Laurens Seelye of the Emergency Committee, offering that "through Drs. Spier and Hill we have a very fine general coverage in New World ethnology, and although neither of these men is an authority on South American ethnology, the demand here would not justify bringing in a man for such a restricted field."

This letter (copy courtesy of Karl Schwerin), which has circulated locally for many years as a particularly ironic document, surely enshrines one of the great moments in the history of intellectual provincialism. But the letter also ignites fantasies about what course Lévi-Strauss's work—historical, ethnological, theoretical, philosophical—might have taken had he been directly exposed to the indigenous world of the Southwestern US, and specifically its vibrant expressive, artistic, and material culture. Seeing the profound influence of Lévi-Strauss's theories on UNM anthropologist Alfonso Ortiz's *The Tewa World* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1972), for example, one can only imagine the complex dialogue that might have followed not just from more direct contact with Southwestern ethnology but from direct contact with indigenous artists and intellectuals in the Southwest and at UNM.