



# CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

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## CONTENTS

- 411 Special Issue Editor's Introduction  
ORIN STARN
- 417 Feeling Historical  
JAMES CLIFFORD
- 427 The Legacies of *Writing Culture* and the Near Future of the Ethnographic Form:  
A Sketch  
GEORGE E. MARCUS
- 446 Ethnography in Late Industrialism  
KIM FORTUN
- 465 Kinky Empiricism  
DANILYN RUTHERFORD
- 480 Ethnography Is, Ethnography Ain't  
JOHN L. JACKSON JR.
- 498 Excelente Zona Social  
MICHAEL T. TAUSSIG
- 518 Precarity's Forms  
KATHLEEN STEWART
- 526 Twenty-Five Years Is a Long Time  
HUGH RAFFLES
- 535 Anthropology and Fiction: An Interview with Amitav Ghosh  
DAMIEN STANKIEWICZ
- 542 PLAYLISTS: BOOKS TO TEACH WITH

On the cover: XXXXXXXXXXXX





## TWENTY-FIVE YEARS IS A LONG TIME

**HUGH RAFFLES**  
The New School

The environment itself is full of free and nonteleological energies—trade winds and storms, oceans streaming over three-fourths of the planet, drifting continental plates, cordilleras of the deep that erupt in volcanic explosions, and miles-deep glaciers piled up on Antarctica that flow into the sea and break off in bobbling icemountains. How can the passions of penguins, albatrosses, jaguars, and humans not lift their eyes beyond the nests and the lairs and the horizons? How can these passions not sink into volcanic rock and the oceanic deserts?

—Alphonso Lingis<sup>1</sup>

Twenty-five years is a long time. Long enough for a book to sediment and fossilize. Long enough to assess its seismic impact on the discipline. Long enough to absorb the aftershocks.<sup>2</sup>

That's 25 years in human time. In geologic time, it's only the slightest breath.<sup>3</sup> The vastness of geologic time is simultaneously incomprehensible and banal. When I began writing about stone, I imagined the relation between geologic and human time as a question of scale. But now, after a year's immersion in stone's vibration, I'm more attuned to the movements of minerals, protons, and photons, to the build-and-decay-and-uplift-and-assimilation, and realize that what preoccupied me occupies me too. Scale is only a small question in this question.

This raises a relevant problem: What is writing culture when the object is neither human nor animal nor “multispecies” nor amenable to flattening into a network or assemblage, and yet is entirely inseparable from life itself, is in fact, life itself, and, correspondingly, pre-, post-, necessary to, indifferent to, and transcendent of the human scale?

I started with a simple question: What is a stone? But soon replaced that with one which seemed more empirical: What can a stone do? It didn’t take long to arrive at some simple answers. A stone can endure, it can change, it can harm, it can heal. It can make you rich, it can make you poor, it can become an enemy, a friend, and a teacher. It can carry your memories and your dreams. It can build empires and bury cities. It can reveal the history of the universe. It can open and close the gates of philosophy. It can change the course of nature. It can change its own nature. It can empty the world of time.

Swapping nouns and adjectives for verbs and adverbs was methodologically helpful, a better place to proceed from. Verbs encircle these supremely protean things but don’t encase them. Now, I could place them squarely in the light and contemplate them. For example, here is a stone I found on a beach in Oregon:



The stone is different from every angle. Every picture I take of it manifests a different stone. Right now, it feels cool in my hand, but it can also hold the heat of the sun. When it’s wet, it has a dull sheen. When the right light hits it, it glows from within. It has ancient leathery skin, turtle’s-neck skin, as if it’s been breathing and stretching for centuries. Its dark mantle is pockmarked with the battles it’s seen.

I have a story about finding this stone and when I tell it, people say: What about the other stones? What about all the other stones on that beach that you didn't pick up, the ones that are still there in Oregon? That's a good question because the other stones, the ones the story leaves behind, the ones that remain in geologic time and only on the periphery of human time, the ones that enter human time only in their generality or in their generalized effects, affordances, and possibilities, those are the stones that raise the most challenging questions for ethnography.

So here's another stone. I encountered this one in Baishan City, Jilin province, China, near the North Korean border. It's *songhua shi*, a type of stone that provincial officials backed by Beijing are hoping will propel the local economy.



Reflecting on a stone not entirely unlike this, the Tang dynasty poet–monk Wu Men wrote: “I intended to search mountains for this stone, / And, to my surprise, I found the mountains in this stone.”<sup>4</sup>

The great Song dynasty poet and philosopher Su Dongpo wrote: “I returned carrying the stone / And now the Eastern Sea was in my sleeve.”<sup>5</sup>

Bai Juyi, another of the famous Tang poets, wrote: “The stones, though unable to speak, / Promised to remain my faithful friends.”<sup>6</sup>

The authors of the early Qing *Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting* wrote: “In estimating people, their quality of *qi* is as basic as the way they are formed; and so it is with rocks. [. . .] How could a cultivated person paint a lifeless rock?”<sup>7</sup>

And Hou Kangyi, who so generously takes the time to talk when I visit his modest apartment close to the second ring road in Beijing, writes: “Stone is calm and unyielding, it is bright and it is selfless. These four qualities of a stone help me to cultivate my body and nurture my nature.”<sup>8</sup>

*Calm, unyielding, bright, selfless.* These are the same four characters used by the Communist poet Guo Moruo to compliment the bowl of *yuhua* (rainflower) stones—colorful pebbles from Nanjing usually displayed under water—that Zhou Enlai, the first Prime Minister of the People’s Republic, kept near his desk.

Hou Kangyi doesn’t mention Guo but he doesn’t need to because my friend Xiaoxiao Huang, translating his essay with me in a bagel store in Manhattan, instantly spots the reference, sending me off on a dizzying cascade of associations that begins with a famous photo of another leader, a beaming President Jiang Zemin, receiving the gift of a *Kunshan* stone, one of the four principal stones of ancient China praised in the *Yunlin shipu*, the first catalogue of such stones, a book published in 1125 and still a touchstone for collectors.<sup>9</sup> Jiang’s enthusiasm raised a fever among ambitious army officers for whom—dedicated to gift-giving but cautious about cash—these rare rocks became such magical objects of possibility and desire that their excavation was soon banned for its impact on the local landscape and arrests were being made of overeager personnel from the nearby military base. I saw one of these stones in a store in Hutai Lu market in Shanghai, a huge stone set on a waist-high platform, an immense and charismatic object that glistened startlingly with a profound otherworldliness, an unfathomable landscape of crystalline peaks, caves, and valleys—far, deep, and wide. According to some stone-lovers, you can travel in a stone like that if both you and it have the requisite qualities. Following the Daoist sages, you enter it, it enters you, scale collapses and you enter, the term is *shen you*, an imaginative journey, a spirit journey, although that word “spirit” is the beginning of an endless journey in itself.<sup>10</sup>

Hou Kangyi was born in 1925 in what is now Dalian, the famous boom town and resort on the Yellow Sea that was then part of an embattled post-Qing Manchuria buffeted by Russia and Japan. Was he reading the Confucian classics at school and college? For 40 years, he taught in middle schools and universities but I only know his life today: the modest apartment he shares with his wife, their hospitality, his carefully nurtured networks, his frequent traveling, his status as one of the country’s most respected stone experts, and his new alliance with Wang Liyang who just published a book called *The Dao of Stone* and who told me I shouldn’t judge a man’s wealth from his appearance because he, Wang Liyang (actually his pen name), here in these cheap pants and ordinary jacket in his small

apartment with its bad *feng shui* had just sold a different apartment for ten million RMB, whereas that other geomancer, the one who is never separated from his mysterious Prada bag and who ferried you, Hugh, around Tianjin last week in that shiny black SUV driven by his elegantly dressed sidekick and who told you he advised KFC when they needed the most propitious arrangement for their Beijing headquarters, well, who knows what *he* has to his name?

In *The Dao of Stone*, Wang Liyang describes three ascending levels of stone appreciation. There is the Ordinary Dao (“directly perceived through sight”). This is the external Dao that corresponds to the focus on surface form, on shape, color, texture, and pattern. Then, there is the Extraordinary Dao (“the heart grasps and the senses appreciate”) in which a cultivated attention to the external (*xing* [form]) enables access to the internal (*shen* [spirit]). And, finally there are Stone Rites (*shi li*), the “superior-vehicle Dao” that draws on both the broad Confucian concept of ritual as the ground for relationships and on the Daoist language of the *Daodejing* through which stone lovers—seeing form but apprehending the formless—“open the stone’s eyes, bathe its heart, cleanse its spirit, and dissolve into the Universe.”<sup>11</sup>

I’m familiar with the first two levels from conversations with stone scholars. The attraction to external form (to brightly colored stones, to stones that strongly resemble propitious animals, etc.) characterizes the collecting activities of the newly rich, some say, whereas the true scholar is drawn deeper, beyond form, into the more ineffable and less calculable qualities of these objects. The superior-vehicle Dao, though, is Wang’s innovation. I try to talk to him about it. So is there a Dao for every being and every object? I ask. I put this fierce-looking stone here to expel evil spirits, he tells me. Do all objects have *qi*? I ask. What is *qi*? he asks me in return.

The poetic sinologist François Jullien remarks that this type of thinking is neither epistemological nor ontological. In the formalized language of Western philosophy, he says, it is better understood as a deontological processual materialization and animation, a moral order grounded in transformation and concretion, in the great cycles of seasons, elements, substance, and matter.<sup>12</sup> “Everything is metaphor,” I’m told in Shanghai and I’m willing to make the intuitive leap and take this as an immersion in a version of geologic time, an accommodation that Chinese stone lovers like Hou Kangyi and Wang Liyang have been exploring explicitly since at least the Republican Era, a folding that promises worldly lessons in becoming with stone. A becoming preoccupied then occupied by stone.<sup>13</sup>

One more. Francesco Ligozzi’s *Dante and Virgil Descending to Hell*, painted in 1620 and now hanging in Florence in the gemlike museum of the Opificio



delle Pietre Dura, a workshop set up in 1588 by Ferdinand I de' Medici where court craftsmen produced ornamental stone inlays for the city's palaces and churches.

Ligozzi painted this scene on Florentine *pietra paesina*, a local limestone that when expertly sliced and polished is so evocative of desolate landscapes and tumultuous history that it was also called "ruin marble." Ligozzi had only to add the flames, the Tuscan oak leaves, Dante, Virgil, a few sadistic demons, and the flailing, naked damned. The stone provided the rest.

Roger Caillois, the maverick surrealist and passionate stone collector, describes work of this type as an "alliance between the skill of the painter and the fantasies of geology."<sup>14</sup> It was especially popular in the court of Ferdinand's son, Cosimo II, where artists also used local Arno limestone with deep and regular veining that resembles ocean waves to provide the scene for epic maritime battles and Jonah's encounter with the whale.

Caillois liked Ligozzi's painting. He detected in it "a clear case of complicity . . . between the subterranean levels of suffering and the genesis of a stone that itself comes from the depths of the earth, roasted in the heat of some non-human furnace." Caillois is taking us somewhere old, somewhere premodern that we've now forgotten so fully that it feels like somewhere new. In work like this, "it is no longer a matter of the painter's whim exploiting a strange material," he says.

“Instead we have an encounter between a subject and a medium which might be called a demonstration of that subject.”<sup>15</sup>

The stone anticipates the painting, maybe even calls it forth, reels in Michelangelo’s famous lines that “Nothing the best of artists can conceive / but lies, potential, in a block of stone.”<sup>16</sup> Confronted by a fellow literati’s famously pictorial marble screen, Su Dongpo, wrote: “Now I am beginning to believe that there are artist gods.”<sup>17</sup> Caillois says that because early modern European scholars knew that the uncanny resemblances in these stones were “sports of nature” they had every reason to think that genuine fossils were similarly natural paintings.<sup>18</sup> Meaningful correspondences maybe, but not manifestations of biological life in geologic time.

Dipping a toe into these depths makes me feel I’ve been doggy-paddling in the froth of culture all these years. When I tell people about the Oregon stone, they ask me about the stones I didn’t pick up, the ones that raise the most challenging questions for ethnography. What if the objects we contemplate are pre-, post-, necessary to, indifferent to, and transcendent of culture? W. J. T. Mitchell’s commonsensical “paleontology of the present” that provincializes “contemporaneity from the perspective of deep time and the possible obsolescence of the human species” is suddenly itself provincialized, an insufficient starting point.<sup>19</sup>

Jean-Christophe Bailly enfoldes human and geologic time in a processive embrace, a dissolution in porosities and exchange.<sup>20</sup> Tim Ingold insists that “things move and grow because they are alive, not because they have agency.”<sup>21</sup> Elizabeth Grosz tunes into “vibratory cosmic forces that generate the possibilities of expression and intensity.”<sup>22</sup> For Gilles Deleuze, “a life is everywhere . . . an immanent life carrying with it the events or singularities that are merely actualized in subjects and objects.”<sup>23</sup> How, asks Alphonso Lingis, can the passions of animals not sink into rock and desert, not sink and return?<sup>24</sup>

Stone, in its stillness and its resonance, pulls us vertiginously into this vastness. “It just happens to be the case,” writes Bailly, “that the stone cannot be withdrawn from living . . . without living being turned into a mere category of being, a simple subtraction.”<sup>25</sup> The stones remaining on the shore. The Eastern Sea in his sleeve. The complicit fantasies of geology. A two-billion-year timeline at the Grand Canyon.

This style of thinking makes me recall Vladimir Nabokov’s warning that only one letter distinguishes the cosmic from the comic.<sup>26</sup> But I press on anyway, tracing the petrified footprints of *Writing Culture* and returning to the fieldwork, in this case to Beijing, to Hou Kangyi, and to Zhuangzi, my favorite Daoist sage, who tips everything into the abyss. “I’m going to try speaking some reckless words,” he wrote, not 25 years ago but some 25 *hundred* years ago. “I’m going to try speaking

some reckless words and I want you to listen to them recklessly. How will that be?<sup>27</sup>

## ABSTRACT

*In the 25 years since Writing Culture was published, ethnography has radically expanded its objects and registers. Drawing on a range of examples, this paper considers some of the issues raised by an ethnography of stone. [ethnography, materiality, stone]*

## NOTES

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1. Alphonso Lingis, "The Navel of the World," In *Dangerous Emotions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), pp. 1–21, p. 2.
2. The book in question is, of course, James Clifford and George E. Marcus (eds.), *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).
3. See Jean-Christophe Bailly, "The Slightest Breath (On Living)," Matthew H. Anderson, trans. *CR: The New Centennial Review* 10(3, 2011):1–12. I am very grateful to Dominic Pettman for sending me this thought-provoking article.
4. Wu Men, "Cold Woods Stone Screen" quoted in Kemin Hu, *The Suyuan Stone Catalog: Scholars' Rocks in Ancient China* (Trumbull, CT: Weatherhill, 2002), p. 67.
5. Quoted in Hu, *Suyuan Stone Catalog*, 103.
6. Quoted in *ibid.*, 58.
7. *The Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting* (1679–1701), Mai-mai Sze, ed. and trans. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1956), p. 129.
8. Hou Kangyi, "To Be a Stone-Like Person," *Wu lao hua shi* [Five Masters Speak of Stone], Lao Ying and Cai Ying, eds. (Xi'an: Shanxi Renmin Chubanshe, 2008), pp. 2–6.
9. Available in a heavily abbreviated English edition as *Tu Wan's Stone Catalogue of Cloudy Forest*, Edward H. Schafer, ed. and trans. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961).
10. For a classic discussion of this type of scaling and its possibilities, see Rolf A. Stein, *The World in Miniature: Container Gardens and Dwellings in Far Eastern Religious Thought*, Phyllis Brooks, trans. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), pp. 52–77. See also, David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Thinking from the Han: Self, Truth, and Transcendence in Chinese and Western Culture* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), and Judith T. Zeitlin, "The Secret Life of Rocks: Objects and Collectors in the Ming and Qing Imagination," *Orientalism* 30(5, 1999), pp. 40–47, who emphasizes the long-standing commercialization of these stones.
11. Wang Liyang, *Shi dao* [The Dao of Stone] (Beijing: Xueyuan Chubanshe, 2010), p. 123.
12. See François Jullien, *Vital Nourishment: Departing from Happiness*, Arthur Goldhammer, trans. (New York: Zone Books, 2007). See also, Mei Zhan, "Worlding Oneness: Daoism, Heidegger, and Possibilities for Treating the Human," *Social Text* 29(4, 2012):107–128. Jullien writes:

That is why Chinese thought has no ontology; it has no world of concrete essences. It possesses neither an individuating soul nor an opposing concept of matter. . . . It does have, though, “materialization” by way of continuous concretion (under the yin factor), as well as “animation,” which dispels its opacity and unfolds it (under the yang factor). Like the external world, I am shaped and kept alive by this tension between self-compensating opposites. The *actualization that constitutes me (xing)* is thus conceived entirely in terms of the process of concentration-emanation that brings it about. [p. 69]

Compare with Deleuze’s late concept of “a life” that is “pure immanence”: “Absolute immanence is in itself: it is not in something, *to* something. It does not depend on an object or belong to a subject” (Gilles Deleuze, “Immanence: A Life,” *Pure Immanence: Essays on A Life*, Anne Boyman, trans. [New York: Zone Books, 2002, pp. 25–33], p. 26.

13. As an example, see Zhang Hong Zhao, *Shi ya* [Correct Stones] (Beijing, 1918), reprinted in *Shuo shi* [On Stones], Sang Xingzhi, ed. (Shanghai: Shanghai Keji Jiaoyu Chubanshe, 1993). For an authoritative account of the impact of Western science in China, including geology, see Benjamin A. Elman, *On Their Own Terms: Science in China, 1550–1900* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).
14. Roger Caillois, *The Writing of Stones*, Barbara Bray, trans. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1985), p. 27.
15. *Ibid.*, 32.
16. Michelangelo Buonarroti, “Nothing the Best of Artists Can Conceive,” in *The Complete Poems of Michelangelo*, John Frederick Nims, trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 96.
17. Quoted in Hu, *Suyuan Stone Catalog*, 64.
18. Caillois, *The Writing of Stones*, p. 16. See also, Jurgis Baltrušaitis, *Aberrations: An Essay on The Legend of Forms*, Richard Miller, trans. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), pp. 73–99, and W. J. T. Mitchell’s insightful discussion of fossils in *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), pp. 167ff.
19. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?* p. 124.
20. Bailly, “The Slightest Breath.”
21. Tim Ingold, “Bringing Things to Life: Creative Entanglements in a World of Materials,” *Realities*, Working Paper, 15 (Manchester: Department of Sociology, University of Manchester, 2010), p. 7; for which I owe many thanks to Brian Goldstone.
22. Elizabeth Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), p. 102.
23. Deleuze, “Immanence: A Life,” p. 29.
24. Lingis, “The Navel of the World,” p. 2.
25. Bailly, “The Slightest Breath,” p. 6.
26. Vladimir Nabokov, *Nikolai Gogol* (New York: New Directions, 1961), p. 142.
27. Zhuangzi, *Basic Writings*, Burton Watson, trans. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), p. 42.