



Imaging Knowledge: Visual Anthropology, Storytelling and the Slow Path Toward Wisdom

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ABSTRACT In this article, I suggest that visual anthropology shows us a powerfully ethical way – through sensuous narrative and shared anthropology – to practice slow anthropology in a fast world. In what follows I examine the work and practices of two great visual anthropologists, Jean Rouch and Lisbet Holtedahl. The research methodology and filmic strategies of these master anthropologists, I suggest, have been profoundly shaped by the slow epistemology of the Songhay (Rouch) and Fulani (Holtedahl) peoples of West Africa. Indeed, the visual narratives and filmic practices of Rouch and Holtedahl demonstrate powerfully the rewards of slowly developed storytelling and image-making. Their works underscore the intellectual gifts of taking a slow path toward the production of knowledge. Their films show us how to move forcefully and ethically into the anthropological future.

Keywords: epistemology, visual anthropology, West Africa

Anduryna kala suuru

“Life is patience” (Songhay proverb)

N’da suuru go ni se, ni fonda ga feru

“If you are patient, your path will open,” (Songhay proverb)

The straight highway lies before us, but we cannot take it because it is permanently
(Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*)

Introduction

Speed and expediency shape much of our contemporary learning. We tend to move quickly from subject to subject. Representations can be rapidly downloaded, scanned, reproduced, perused, edited and reconfigured – all to increase human understanding and connection. But as philosopher Mark Taylor and sociologist Sherry Turkle have suggested the culture of speed, which has positively increased the spread of information, has also brought increases in social disconnection, eroded inter-personal empathy, and limited processes of thinking (Taylor 2014; Turkle 2016). There is no shortage of philosophical works that offer alternative approaches to living in the “culture of speed.” Having long conducted fieldwork in West Africa I believe that one alternative to the “culture of speed” is embodied in the wisdom of people like the Songhay of Niger. But can the wisdom of a non-Western culture offer ways to increase human connection, enhance inter-personal empathy and deepen contemplative thinking?

In this article, I suggest that visual anthropology shows us a powerfully ethical way – through sensuous narrative and shared anthropology – to practice slow anthropology in a fast

world. In what follows I examine the work and practices of two great visual anthropologists, Jean Rouch and Lisbet Holtedah. The research methodology and filmic strategies of these master anthropologists, I suggest, have been profoundly shaped by the slow epistemology of the Songhay (Rouch) and Fulani (Holtedah) peoples of West Africa. Indeed, the visual narratives and filmic practices of Rouch and Holtedah demonstrate powerfully the rewards of slowly developed storytelling and image-making. Their works underscore the intellectual gifts of taking a slow path toward the production of knowledge. Their films show us how to move forcefully and ethically into the anthropological future.

The World According to Jean Rouch

Imagine the following scene. Sometime in the early 1980s you are in Paris. You enter the *Musée de l'Homme*. You climb a steep flight of marble stairs and turn toward a temporary partition that shields a small opening that leads to Jean Rouch's Comité du Film Ethnographique office, which is abuzz with activity. Rouch sits behind a cluttered desk, perched on a platform that commands the office. He is somehow simultaneously talking on the phone and debating some bureaucratic detail with his erstwhile associate, Françoise Foucault. Tacked up haphazardly on the wall are countless photos of famous documentarians, filmmakers and actors. There are scores of boxes filled with photographs. Along the stairs that lead up to a second floor, you might stumble upon piles of haphazardly arranged metal cans containing scores of Rouch's finished and unfinished films.

Amid this organized chaos, Rouch hangs up the phone and asks everyone to climb the stairs to his projection room, a small space with perhaps nine makeshift chairs. Some young documentarians have come to Paris to project their unfinished work to the master. They are nervous.

What will he think?

A film is projected and Rouch asks for commentary. Most people at the screening discuss such things as camera angles, editing issues, sound quality and the texture of establishment shots. In time, Rouch, who, as always, sits in the front row, chimes in:

Where is the story in this film?

How can you fix the story?

What can you do so that the film connects with the audience?

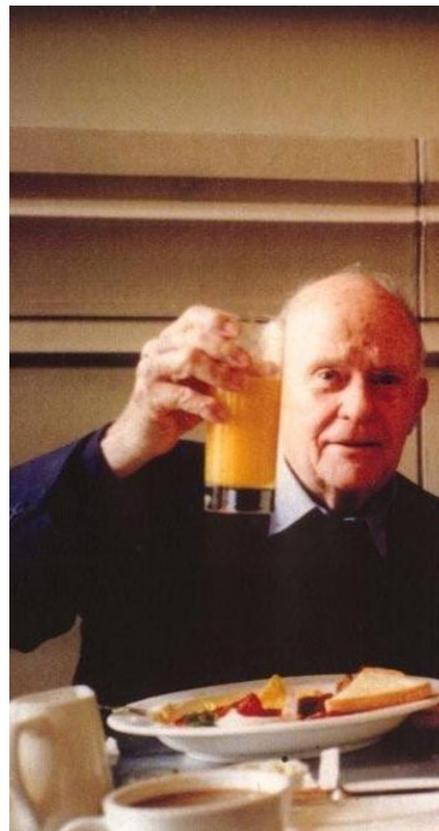


Figure 1: Jean Rouch Toasting the Rouch 2000 Retrospective at New York University. Photograph: Françoise Foucault

These brief comments cut to heart of Jean Rouch's project – the art of storytelling, the importance of which he learned from his Songhay mentors in the Republics of Niger and

Mali. For them, deep knowledge is conveyed through narrative, which has the capacity to evoke complexity through the elegant simplicity of stories. The power of the story, Rouch taught me, emerges not just from the tale that is told, but from the more profound context of longstanding friendship and trust – shared anthropology. Jean Rouch's oeuvre also demonstrates that scholars and filmmakers are the custodians of knowledge. As custodians, the most important obligation is to tell stories that convey this cherished knowledge to the next generation. These principles, which are evoked in Jean Rouch's films and texts, are the bedrock of Songhay epistemology and the foundation of Songhay wisdom. It takes time and patience for the mind to develop, for practices to be refined, for a person to become a master of her or his work. And once that mastery is achieved, the master's greatest obligation is to pass the knowledge on to the next generation (See Henley 2009; Feld 2003; Predal, 1982).

The World According to Lisbet Holtedahl

You stand before the entrance to Sultan Issa Maigari's vast palace, an imposing image. Then you move inside the palace's dark corridors and find the Sultan, dressed in a splendidly embroidered purple robe, making his way through the dark sinewy corridors of his palace. He sees one of his young toddlers and picks him up. Together they move toward the light of the inner courtyard. In the distance you see a team of women cleaning the compound with whisks fashioned from dried grass. Beyond the women, you see the Sultan's magnificent horse. Courtiers prepare the stallion for the Sultan, who will ride it into the center of Ngaoundere to meet the Cameroonian Minister of the Interior – the juxtaposition of the traditional and the modern, a sign of irrevocable change. As the Sultan approaches his horse, court musicians, in tribute to their ruler, blow their trumpets. The Sultan mounts his horse. Surrounded by an entourage of courtiers Sultan Issa Maigari slowly makes his way to the center of town, all symbolic of the longstanding religious and political prestige of the royal ruler. This slow take in *The Sultan's Burden* (Holtedahl 1995) underscores the slow pace of everyday life – even in the royal enclaves of the Northern Cameroon Adamawa Sultanate. This scene depicts life as it has been lived in this far-away place – or does it?

By taking us deep into the corridors of Sultan Issa Maigari's palace viewers get a complex portrait of the Sultan, who is the spiritual and political leader of the Adamawa Province of Northern Cameroon. He is sauntering slowly among his wives, his children, his advisors and his praise-singers. It is an intimate glimpse – the result of years of shared anthropology – into the character of a proud, traditional leader who has the daunting challenge of confronting the irrevocable loss of prestige and power as the Cameroonian state begins the process of secular democratization. The film evokes a profoundly human theme: what are the existential dimensions of love and loss?

In her latest production, *Wives*, which was filmed between 1992 and 2015, Holtedahl brings her slow and shared anthropology into the compound of an Islamic scholar, Al Hajji Alkali Ibrahim Goni, who was for 45 years a traditional judge in the aforementioned Sultanate of Issa Maigari. The film showcases the uneven textures of relations between Al Hajji and his many wives, some of whom he divorced, some of whom died, and some of whom he divorced and remarried. In Holtedahl's words, the film describes the "various household scenes of everyday life events and interviews. With this, I hope to identify the audio-visual material's contribution to my understanding of marriage, love and dependency of six of Al Hajji's wives and their husband." At the end of the film Al Hajji Goni, tired and old, is approaching death. From the intimate inside the audience sees the how the spread of

death's shadow cuts to the core of Al Hajji Goni's humanity and how it changes deep-seated feelings of love and loss in a household so far removed from our experience. In so doing, Holtedahl makes the strange familiar. In so doing she uses slow and shared anthropology to create emotional and social connections in an increasingly disconnected world.

These intimate and deeply human films are the result of Lisbet Holtedahl's gradually developed shared anthropology. Like Jean Rouch among the Songhay, Holtedahl spent decades of field time among the Fulani of Northern Cameroon. She learned to speak fluent Fulfulde enabling her to cultivate longstanding friendships with a wide variety of people in the region. In time this slow approach enhanced her sensitivity to the human dilemmas of her subjects, which, in turn, has given her films, like those of Rouch, an uncanny tenderness, a seductive informality and no small measure of pathos.



Figure 2: Lisbet Holtedahl speaking at the Crossing Paths: A Conference in Celebration of Visual Anthropology and the Work of Professor Lisbet Holtedahl, University of Tromsø, June 02, 2017. Photograph: Trond Waage.

Shared Anthropology and Situated Practice

If scholars commit to doing long-term fieldwork, a commitment that spans many decades, they become sensitive to the accountability of their work. How will the people they have described in articles, books and films respond to their professional work? Will they understand it? Will anthropological texts and images misrepresent them? Will they offend them? These issues, of course, have long been of deep anthropological concern – especially so now that social media makes anthropological work so much more accessible to the “represented.” Like physicians, most contemporary anthropologists subscribe to the healer's oath: do no harm. And yet, despite the best of efforts, medical procedures sometimes inadvertently do a great deal of harm. The same, of course, can be said of anthropological essays, ethnographies, and ethnographic films.

This issue is of particular importance in visual anthropology. Through social media, images travel far and wide. They sometimes unintentionally project scenes that reinforce

primitivist and racist ideologies. In 1992, Wilton Martinez's essay: "Who constructs anthropological knowledge?" demonstrated the pervasiveness of the misinterpretation of ethnographic visual images. Based upon surveys of ethnographic film audiences, Martinez found that many ethnographic films – even well-known classics – have tended to reinforce primitivist stereotypes, the very worst spectator outcome an anthropologist might experience. Martinez (1992: 132) "found many students decode films in an 'aberrant' way (Eco, 1979) with relatively high levels of disinterest, 'culture shock' and/or alienation, and with a relatively low level of 'understanding' (correspondent with textual and pedagogical intended meanings)." These inconvenient findings mean that scholars, especially image-making anthropologists, need to take care as they come to terms with arenas of negative audience interpretations.

In contemporary anthropology then, representational challenges are monumental. If one is a writer, how does she or he craft a "faithful" and "representative" text in which readers are inspired to "turn the page?" For the filmmaker, how does one lure the audience into a sensuous visual world in a way that does not reinforce destructive stereotypes. For great practitioners like Jean Rouch and Lisbet Holtedahl the answer, which is consistent with Martinez's findings about the "readability" of narrative films, is deceptively simple: one entices audiences with stories gleaned from slowly developed friendships that are full of love and loss. The texture of an essay or film, then, devolves from the quality of the social connections between the anthropologist and the people he or she attempts to represent.

Taking his cue from the film practices of Robert Flaherty who, in search of collaborative input, showed his unfinished films to his Inuit subjects, Jean Rouch decided early on to make collaborative films among the Songhay and Dogon of Niger and Mali. For more than 30 years, he collaborated with his Nigerien sidekicks – Damoure Zika, Lam Ibrahim and Tallou Mouzarane – to make films that joyously celebrated the often inexplicable complexities of ever-changing social life in West Africa. In a film practice grounded in his longstanding friendships with Nigeriens, Rouch always concerned himself with the audience. He often talked about three audiences. He liked to say: I am the first audience. Does the film work for me? The second audience is comprised of the people in front of the camera. What do the subjects think about the film? Is it faithful to their lived realities? The third group is the broader public. What can the film teach about the human condition? If all three audiences like a work, Rouch would say, the film "will give birth to other films."

In the early 1950s Jean Rouch had footage of what was to become *Bataille sur le grand fleuve* (1952), a film about the great hippopotamus hunters of Firgoun, Niger. Rouch brought the unfinished footage of the hippo hunt to Ayoru, a Niger River market town, near Firgoun. He nailed a sheet to a mudbrick wall and, using a portable generator, projected his footage. The Firgoun hippo hunters silently watched the projection. When Rouch asked for comments, the Firgoun hunters, immediately understood the language of film, critiqued what they had seen, objecting to the background stock music that, like an invisible intruder, accompanied the hunters on their quest. They said that noise (*cosongo*, in Songhay) would spoil the hunt. Accordingly, Rouch removed the background music from his film. (see Henley 2010).

Like Rouch, Holtedahl's shared anthropology compelled her to become profoundly sensitive to local responses to her work. In their essay on these issues, Arnsten and Holtedahl (2005: 69) wrote:

Our preoccupation with the recipient should be seen mainly as a result of many years' of preoccupation with the impact on society of research-based knowledge. Our engagement

with film and our attempts to create and disseminate knowledge by use of film as a tool have proved to be very useful for such an appreciation. When analyzing the situatedness of knowledge and focusing on the person who is supposed to “receive” “the knowledge,” it is necessary to differentiate possible positions of the receiver. When anthropologists are in the field interacting with local “informants”, i.e. with their research partners, they have notions about who will be their target groups. They see themselves processing material for future dissemination. The target group persons have qualities and interests. We think that these notions are relevant for the anthropologists’ observations and behavior. But the research partners, too, have their target groups: First of all, they are each other’s audience in the social situations. In addition, they are often conscious of other audiences or target groups with which they are more or less familiar: the future readers of the anthropologists’ book and viewers of his/her film.

Audiences of people who have been in front of the camera, of course, have their own subjective interpretations of what they are seeing. As Arnsten and Hultedahl suggest, anthropologists should take these issues very seriously – a consequence of slowly developed shared anthropology.

Vulnerability

Even if scholars carefully anticipate many of the negative reactions to their works and take care to craft a good story, there is still no guarantee that a text or film will resonate with readers or audiences. There are books and films that hit all the right notes – good stories, sensuous descriptions, breathtaking cinematography, and seamless editing – but somehow remain obscure, unread, unwatched, and uninspiring.

What is missing from these books and films?

One deceptively simple answer is: characters who are vulnerable – imperfect human beings whose life stories compel readers or audiences to connect. In his films Jean Rouch understood this important element of storytelling. In Rouch’s *Jaguar*, the audience meets four young Nigeriens, each with his own set of social problems, meet the challenges of their times – earning wage labor or entrepreneurial profits in the Colonial Gold Coast in order to help their struggling families in Niger. On their epic journey through today’s Burkina Faso, Togo, and Ghana, they stumble here and there. In a variety of tense and funny scenes, they reveal their prejudices and express the wonder of the new. Through extraordinary bricolage, they somehow make their way to Kumasi where they open a small shop, *Petit à petit l’oiseau fait son nid* (Little by little the bird makes its nest). They sell *nyama-nyama* (a little of this and a little of that) and make money. As I have witnessed countless times, audiences in Niger, Europe and North America follow the protagonists with intense interest. Against all odds, they save enough money to bring home the bounty of their exotic mission to the edge of the world. Upon their return they heroically give away all that they had earned. Indeed, in all of his innovative films of ethno-fiction (*Jaguar*, *La pyramide humaine*, *Moi – un noir*, not to forget *Chronique d’un été*, Rouch showcases vulnerable characters – men and women, old and young, West Africans, and French. Within and between the frames of these classic films, these vulnerable characters open their being to the world. They invite viewers to enter their complicated worlds. Their poignant stories connect viewers to a different set of insights that are unveiled in a new world. In my experience, audiences tend accept this invitation and learn something new.

It takes time and patient persistence to evoke the complexities of character in a text or film, a lesson well gleaned from Lisbet Holtedahl's recent film, *Wives* for which Holtedahl brought her slow and shared anthropology into the compound of an Islamic scholar, Al Hajji Alkali Ibrahim Goni, the aforementioned traditional judge in the aforementioned Adamawa Sultanate of Issa Maigari. In Holtedahl's words, the film describes the "various household scenes of everyday life events and interviews. With this, I hope to identify the audio-visual material's contribution to my understanding of marriage, love and dependency of six of Al Hajji's wives and their husband." At the end of the film Al Hajji Goni, tired and old, is approaching death. He opens himself to the audience. Viewers have shared his triumphs, his disappointments, his pride of craft and his personal remorse. In the face of death his dignity draws the audience to him and compels viewers to remember him – a model for us all.

Embracing vulnerability is a risky proposition. It violates what Mary Louise Pratt (1986), long ago called "conventions of representation." For his part Rouch invented a new genre, ethno-fiction, to underscore the vulnerabilities of men and women confronting the decay of West African colonialism, the irrevocable change brought on by independence, and the ugly persistence of racism – themes that are still very much with us in the world. For her part, Holtedahl took such time and care in her fieldwork that a Fulani cleric allowed her camera of intimacy to record his most private moments and his most deeply guarded emotions, and this among a people known for their deep reserve and rectitude (Riesman 1977). You could say that Rouch and Holtedahl went "rogue" in their films to depict human vulnerabilities, depictions that move audiences to engage in a powerfully silent Buberian I-Thou dialogue – a powerful way for people to think a new thought or feel a new feeling.

On the Slow Path Toward Wisdom

Authors of ethnographic works that remain open to the world try to make sure that that human emotion and vulnerability are foregrounded in the text or showcased within and between the frames of films. Following the epistemological path of wise Songhay and Fulani elders Rouch and Holtedahl practiced slow anthropology well before the invention of the Slow Food Movement, which was initially a protest against the opening of a McDonalds, the icon of fast food establishments, near the Spanish Steps in Rome. In 1986, Carlo Petrini, an Italian activist and journalist, informally organized the slow food movement. In Paris in 1989 Petrini and others formally founded their International movement. Here is their manifesto.

FOR THE DEFENSE OF AND THE RIGHT TO PLEASURE INTERNATIONAL SLOW FOOD MANIFESTO

Born and nurtured under the sign of Industrialization, this century first invented the machine and then modelled its lifestyle after it. Speed became our shackles. We fell prey to the same virus: the 'fast life' that fractures our customs and assails us even in our own homes, forcing us to ingest 'fast- food.' Homo sapiens must regain wisdom and liberate itself from the 'velocity' that is propelling it on the road to extinction. Let us defend ourselves against the universal madness of 'the fast life' with tranquil material pleasure. Against those – or, rather, the vast majority – who confuse efficiency with frenzy, we propose the vaccine of an adequate portion of sensual gourmandise pleasures, to be taken with slow and prolonged enjoyment. Appropriately, we will start in the kitchen, with Slow Food. To escape the tediousness of

‘fast-food’, let us rediscover the rich varieties and aromas of local cuisines. In the name of productivity, the ‘fast life’ has changed our lifestyle and now threatens our environment and our land (and city) scapes. Slow Food is the alternative, the avant-garde’s riposte. Real culture is here to be found. First of all, we can begin by cultivating taste, rather than impoverishing it, by stimulating progress, by encouraging international exchange programs, by endorsing worthwhile projects, by advocating historical food culture and by defending old-fashioned food traditions. Slow Food assures us of a better quality lifestyle. With a snail purposely chosen as its patron and symbol, it is an idea and a way of life that needs much sure but steady support.

From its very beginning, the Slow Food Movement was less a platform for recipes for sumptuous slow cooking than a sustained cultural critique of life in the fast lane of contemporary society. It has been a critique of the endless array of “tasteless” offerings in fast food restaurants, the widespread anonymity of Facebook “friendships,” the dearth of face-to-face conversations as well as the global corporatization of social relations.

The narrative contours of the films of Jean Rouch and Lisbet Holtedahl created a context in images for slow professing in the academy. As Maggie Berg and Barbara K. Seeber suggest in their wonderful book, *The Slow Professor* (2016), the corporatization of higher education has diverted our attention from the principal missions of colleges and universities: (1) supporting scholarship that enhances our comprehension of the world; and (2) training students to think critically and write clearly so they can become engaged and productive citizens. Berg and Seeber in fact, claim that the culture of speed in higher education has created so much tedious “make-work” that professors and students have little time to read, think or write. Berg and Seeber recommend that professors and students slow down to rediscover the essence of higher education and to reconstitute the fundamental and productive bond that emerges in the relationship of professor to student. In the face of widespread bureaucratization, they also offer common-sense suggestions for recapturing the magic of contemplative and creative higher education. For Berg and Seeber, citing Petrini (2007:183) slow professing should not be simply considered as the juxtaposition slow and fast; rather the contrast “between attention and distraction; slowness, in fact, is not so much a question of duration as of an ability to distinguish and evaluate, with the propensity to cultivate pleasure, knowledge, and quality.” As Berg and Seeber (2016: 90-91) write: “Distractedness and fragmentation characterize contemporary academic life; we believe that Slow ideals restore a sense of community and conviviality. . . . As envisioned in our manifesto, Slow professors act with purpose, cultivating emotional and intellectual resistance to the effects of the corporatization of higher education.”

Enter the discipline of anthropology which is well suited to fit into the ever-expanding matrix of slowness. As the work of Jean Rouch and Lisbet Holtedahl has demonstrated, anthropology has the particular distinction of being a slow science in a fast world. It takes us many years to develop anthropological insights – years spent listening to the people anthropologists encounter in the field. This slow practice has produced the ethnographic record, an invaluable body of knowledge that underscores the wisdom of “others,” a wisdom that we would be wise to extend to the social, cultural and political infelicities that constitute our contemporary culture of speed.

Slow anthropology, however, is more than “taking your time” to conduct long-term field research and then carefully crafting ethnographic books and film; it is also about the gradual maturation of knowledge. Jean Rouch learned this principle from Songhay elders

in the Republic of Niger who have long understood the power of slowness. In my own education, these kind and patient elders insisted that as a young man I must first learn the rudimentary elements of sorcerous knowledge. They forced me to slow down. “That’s enough talk for now,” they would tell me on my visits to Niger. “Come back next year,” they would tell me, “to continue to learn.” “But I want to learn more,” I’d tell my teachers with no small amount of impatience. “You’re not ready yet,” they’d tell me. “Come back next year.”

My apprenticeship with Adamu Jenitongo spanned 17 years. Toward the end of his life, he told me: “You have lived among us for a long time, but to understand us you must grow old with us.” When Adamu Jenitongo’s death brought an end to my apprenticeship in 1988, I thought I had learned a great deal. As time passed by, I realized that despite my 17-year apprenticeship to a Songhay elder, my comprehension of things about Songhay lacked depth.

It took me more than 25 years and a confrontation with serious illness for me to understand that sorcery was not simply a competition for power, but a quest for well-being. Unseasoned sorcerers might unleash lethal “work” to harm or kill an enemy, but practitioners like Adamu Jenitongo used their mature knowledge and power to promote harmony, conviviality and health – well-being. Adamu Jenitongo taught me this central lesson early on in my fieldwork but I did not have the wherewithal – the experience of love and loss – to “see” what he had been “really” teaching me. Back then, he had planted in me the seeds of knowledge; it took the passage of time and a confrontation with mortality for me to finally understand my teacher’s teaching.

In the slow world of Songhay sorcery, illness is a great teacher. It challenges the student to see himself or herself clearly. It sensitizes a person to the pain and suffering of others. It compels one to understand that a person’s greatest obligation – as a sorcerer or as a scholar – is to pass slowly acquired knowledge on to the next generation. In so doing the sorcerers, scholars, filmmakers and anthropologists, open themselves to the world. In so doing they are likely to find the resolve to invent a new genre, like Jean Rouch, to make profoundly intimate films, like Lisbet Holtedahl, or to understand how a confrontation with illness might compel a person to return to where he or she began and, to paraphrase T.S. Eliot, know it for the first time (Eliot 1968).

When anthropologists begin a slow T.S. Eliot-style anthropological journey, they may well eventually come back to the beginning and know the place for the first time. Perhaps they’ll realize that like all scientific truths, anthropological concepts are fleeting. They have their initial moments of a bright insight and then fade back into obscurity. During my time as a linguist and anthropologist so many concepts have appeared as “the next new thing” and then faded away. Here is a partial list of golden – and not so golden – oldies: transformational grammar, generative semantics, conversational analysis, discourse analysis, ethno-science, symbolic anthropology, Marxist anthropology, political economy, French structuralism, post-structuralism, postmodernism, globalization and multi-sited anthropology, human rights discourses, the ontological turn. The anthropological writing on these theoretically varied topics has contributed significantly to our comprehension of the human condition, but I wonder how much of this writing will be remembered?

Slow ethnographers produce texts and films that are more likely to remain open to the world – to be read, seen and debated. More than 50 years after they first appeared, Jean Rouch’s films continue to underscore the fragility of human being. They teach us about

ugliness, of hatred and the courage of the oppressed. Lisbet Holtedahl's films evoke profound dignity in the face of love and loss, themes that connect us all.

Beyond the theoretical flavor of the day, our discipline's great gift to the world is the ethnographic record, which through prose narrative or through film image, can forge memorable bonds between writers and readers, between filmmakers and their audiences. These are Slow Movement bonds that take us a step closer to a more convivial present. Jean Rouch and Lisbet Holtedahl have walked this slow path toward knowledge. It is a way filled with respect for the lessons of the elders whose paths lead to wisdom. It is path well worth taking.

Acknowledgments

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