My title is from an essay by Nigerian writer Ben Okri, which I draw on to address one aspect of classic empiricism in anthropology that I have found particularly important, namely the element of surprise, or “impression” (Hume), as an instigator to thought. Quickening is the moment when a being gives evidence of its own life and presence. An epistemology of surprise has been widely and frequently practiced in anthropology, as is illustrated from works across many fields and theoretical orientations. Variations in conventions of instigation and completion are traced back through skeptic and enlightenment practices; linked to artisanal, poetic, and artistic processes within the discipline across its history; compared in the imagery in classic works from Africa and Melanesia; and then explored in the recent “radical empiricism” of Michael Jackson and politically inflected works that focus on fragments, gaps, and absences rather than presences. Examples from my own work on political economic “quickenings”—a baffling confusion of referents for a number term in Cameroon, and an arresting Nigerian complaint that “there’s no money,” in a globally monetized world—conclude the lecture, showing the wide applicability of this mode of reasoning, which traces a genealogy from Hume and Greek skeptical empiricism.

Keywords: empiricism, ethnography, history of anthropology, surprise, wonder

Introduction
The invitation to deliver the Munro Lecture in Edinburgh, home to David Hume, has been an inspiration to trace out a particular practice of the anthropological version of empiricism that I first studied as an undergraduate at the London School of Economics, exactly fifty years ago (1962–1965): a time when Bronislaw Malinowski was still remembered as a presence and Argonauts of the Western Pacific (1922) was a foundational first-year text. Jonathan Spencer (2000) writes of the central importance, at that time, of the research seminar focused on...
ethnography, in developing a “social anthropological habitus.” In his appendix on method, in *Witchcraft, oracles, and magic* (1937), E. E. Evans-Pritchard had insisted on the importance of a wide reading in theory for carrying out ethnographic research, citing continental philosophy and Levy-Bruhl as preparing the mind for perceiving the world. Yet when Max Gluckman traced out shifts in theory within British anthropology twenty years later, he still strongly endorsed the craft that derived from Malinowski. “Theory is but one side of a science: the other equally important side is the type of data that are subjected to theoretical analysis” (Gluckman 1961: 5).

From the 1960s, taking off during my own student years, the potential for a routinized habitus to foster blindnesses was already provoking scrutiny, especially as the works of Frantz Fanon ([1961] 1963) and Walter Rodney (1972) were being published. Their compatriots, who were also first hand witnesses of “dying colonialism” (in Fanon’s terms, [1959] 1965), were among our student colleagues. The neo-Marxist critique was developing and the possibility of a new anthropological-historical conversation within this latter theoretical framework was being powerfully exemplified by E. P. Thompson’s monumental *The making of the English working class* (1963). Soon into the next decade, Talal Asad (1973) published a direct critique of the colonial framing of anthropology, under the title of *Anthropology and the colonial encounter*. Feminist studies (such as Lamphere and Rosaldo [1974] and Reiter [1975]) and other postcolonial studies (Said 1978) all opened up critiques of practice. More recently, anthropology has taken at least two other “turns”: the linguistic turn in the 1980s, and a currently developing so-called ontological turn (see Scott 2013).

While theoretical parameters shifted, I see a specific practice that has crossed time, domain, and theoretical framing, and which I foreground in this lecture, in order to contribute to widening and deepening the sense of a disciplinary genealogy to attentiveness to *being*. This lecture is not an argument with particular current or past fully articulated theoretical positions, so much as a recall of the many instances of what I would like to define as an *epistemology of surprise*, across a wide range of scholarship, whose breadth makes it worth relinking to the long history of empiricism to examine its inner workings and applications. In the same postwar, mid-century moment Bertrand Russell (1954: 8) quoted and endorsed Hume’s most famous claim, that: “Reason is, and ought only to be, the slave of the passions.” Passion impresses, at the beginning of the creation of knowledge, and settles, at the end; reason traces the pathways between the two. They meet most obviously in the two transitional pauses in which the shift is made. “Surprise,” and evocations of its etymology of being “taken over,” or “overtaken,” even “seized,” are often evoked in anthropology. Two opportunities open here: first, to devote close attention to exactly how that *first moment-after-surprise*, and then the *last moment-before-settlement*, have been navigated, in different domains of the discipline, under different theoretical designs of research, and in different places and conditions in the world. And then, the very smallness, frequency, and variability of surprise in anthropology, makes its instances an opening to comparative exploration of its operation, in relation to classic skeptical empiricist thought, the continual proclaimed revolutions and reinventions of the discipline and critique of hidden assumptions.
This would be a vast topic, whereas the present work is a lecture, even in its revised form, having benefited from comment and critique. It is necessarily briefer than the subject deserves. Some works are invoked too briefly, but this is out of respect for the pathways they have indicated for further exploration. The main purpose here cannot be comprehensive, but rather to draw to the fore a long-shared epistemology that one finds in varied places and that then can provide inspiration across the various subdivisions and phases of the discipline. My own work has focused on the political-economic-material dimensions of life, under historically shifting conditions. Yet I have found inspiration in artistic, humanistic, comparative, and relatively ahistorical works within and outside of anthropology. A shared critical epistemology of surprise in the work of others has created this potential for me, even when our operative theories and subject matters may diverge. In the final section, I show how an epistemology of surprise has opened up a variety of exploratory routes, collegial interchanges, and provisional conclusions of the kind that were envisaged by the classic skeptic empiricists.

The new cognitive science of ordinary thought sees the quick response to new situations as intuitive (such as decision-theorist Daniel Kahneman [2011] on Thinking: Fast and slow and analogical (such as Douglas Hofstadter and Emmanuel Sander [2013] in their book Surfaces and essences: Analogy as the fuel and fire of thinking). Kahneman in fact endorses Hume’s theory as “a good start” (2011: 52). Insofar as there are particular disciplinary approaches, with cautious reflexivity at every point, we can explore the archive to see how that moment-after-surprise has worked. There are two broad paths here that, at best, are highly complementary: one drawing on philosophical precisions within and outside the situation, and the other on a rapid return to other empirical phenomena within the immediate aura of the initial surprise.

The first turns toward philosophy, within its own pauses for thought. Conversations with colleagues at Johns Hopkins University have made me more acutely aware of the smallness and the multiplicity of the stages through which research could benefit from philosophical resources. Veena Das has focused precisely on this moment of noticing something as, perhaps, a “fragment” for which philosophical acuity could contribute a next step toward understanding. For example, when she sees a group of women sitting still in the street, “embodying pollution and dirt” (2007: 104), she brings her own knowledge of Hindu mythology to bear on this arresting situation and then turns to Cavell’s notion that reading it as such does “not exclude the idea that there might be argument about it” (2007: 104). Gestures are paused over from different philosophical angles, which can then be opened to each other. Following such a vein back to the archive, one could read deeply, with an anthropological imagination, Gilles Deleuze’s books on Hume (1991) and Spinoza (1988) side by side, paying particular attention to how each approaches one or another moment in the inception and resting of thought.

In the longer history of ethnography, it is the second trajectory across the pause between passion and reason that has been more in evidence, also inflected with self-examination over the sources of one’s own reaction. Perhaps because the first transition happens immediately, in fieldwork, without an archive to draw on, it seems to depend on very simple questions that suspend the immediacy of imposing the “why” of explanatory practices. The instantaneous first questions after the (Humean) “impression” are “what?” and “how?,” which then return us to the life
that has provoked attention in the first place. “What could this be?” and “How is it possible?” The intuition and analogy of ordinary thought are suspended so that the phenomenon can be its own form of life, continuing to make its own impression, and not yet taken into our own frames of reference as an object of study or interpretation. The counterpart to the “what?” and “how?” of the moment-after-surprise, in the moment-before-settlement, may be the question “where?”: where are we now? In what proximity to that initial surprise? Many of the endings of works in various empiricist traditions rest on locational imagery: a plateau, a horizon, a clearing. The affinity of this idea of a place to rest, to survey the scene, seems very close to the ancient skeptics’ orientation toward ataraxia, equanimity, in the ethical life, where a refined sense of unresolvability is seen as truer and better in human affairs than certainty. A disciplinary sensibility for ataraxia seems to me an entailment of an epistemology of surprise. Within a disciplinary community, its forms then define where engagements can pick up again. Hume observed this, in his own life. Near its end, he wrote “I am... a man of mild dispositions... of great moderation... this is a matter of fact” and ready to dispel “clouds of philosophical melancholy and delirium” by being “merry with my friends” (Hume in the Treatise, quoted in Basson 1958: 151). The radical skeptic finds a point of rest, not with a proof nor a blur of indeterminacy but with some remaining perceptions and intellectual locations that were motivated by the first questions of “what” it was that surprised, and “how” it came to be.

My title captures several of these dynamics in a creative arts register. It comes from the Nigerian poet and writer Ben Okri, so from the arts and from Africa. The lecture is organized from this point into five sections. The first section will look at 1) the philosophy of “quickening” in Okri’s thought and in classic and early modern skeptical empiricism, followed by 2) instances of surprise in the classic history of anthropology: Morgan, Malinowski, and I insert briefly here Henry Morton Eden, who was perhaps the most immediate self-declared successor to Hume, and whose work informs Marx and Engels’ studies of the English working class. Then I move to 3) an anthropological embrace of poetic/artistic/local-intellectual inspiration (Victor Turner and Mary Douglas). Both of them are African scholars, who use somewhat similar imagery, which then offers me the opportunity to compare briefly their description of method with the cognate “puzzle”- and “wonder”-focused work of Marilyn Strathern in Melanesia. And then I turn to 4) the new phenomenological empiricism of Michael Jackson, where the question of what it is that “surprises” us, and where it leads us, is raised again in a new way. A short addition here then alludes to surprises that are shocking, conveying absence as well as presence. Here new attention to the “fragment,” in the Benjaminian inspiration of Michael Taussig, has a close affinity to recent reminders by David Graeber and Michael Jackson of surprise as a provocation to fear and confusion rather than confidence and even joy (as with “wonder”). I conclude by returning to 5) my own work in political-economic and historical modes, where surprise has

---

1. Cf. also Peirce’s notion of the ground of things, that iconic quality in external referents that “calls” for signification (Eco 1999). I thank Giovanni da Col for highlighting the connection.
opened up whole new horizons. Pauses after-surprise and before-settlement have arisen at several small moments across the whole arc of exploration and argumentation. I leave for other engagements a series of observations along the way in this lecture, that deserve more participation than a solitary mind can muster without plunging into Hume’s “melancholy and delirium.”

“Quickening” and related concepts
My title brings to the fore the subtitle of a paper written several years ago and presently in press, under the title is Of poetry and positivism: The quickening of the unknown (2014). That paper centers on poetry as a source in empirical social scientific studies. For an earlier article, I had used a Cameroonian epic for analysis of a process I called social composition: that is, social mobilization as the configuration of the singularities of specialized adepts, rather than as structures of roles in a division of labor and power (Guyer and Eno Belinga 1995). I questioned the classic fission-and-fusion model of “segmentary societies,” and also the newer neo-Marxist theory of “wealth-in-people,” especially its implication that political process in “stateless societies” could be understood as “accumulation” in a straightforward quantitative sense. I examined an epic poem and found evidence in the profusion of names of people and places on the many journeys, engagements, and regroupings of the narrative, of an alternative social process, based on the singularity of people and their grouping by composition.

This exploration had been motivated by the Beti assumption that “mekyac, mekyac,” “there are many kinds of” everything, including “all sorts of synthesis . . . of composite images” (Laburthe-Tolra 1977: 27–28). The initial spark of surprise for me was the sheer implausibility of one of the items in the inventory: “There are all sorts of lineages, all sorts of marriages, all sorts of chiefs and slaves, all sorts of rituals and dances, all sorts of hunting and trapping, of machetes or cooking spoons” (1977: 27–28; see Guyer 1996 for discussion). If there were specialist carvers of different kinds of spoons, one could hardly think about a division of labor, since the production of things could presumably be amplified indefinitely, as the larger ethnographic sources revealed when I searched them carefully and as I remembered from various passing comments during fieldwork.

That foray into poetry, however, left empiricism itself—what I had then called positivism in the title, but mainly for the alliterative effect—as less examined, especially the possible place of poetic imagination within an empiricist epistemology. In moving from poetry as source to poetry as a component of method, I found the quotation from Okri to be a close analogue to an epistemology of surprise in anthropology. Okri declares himself deeply skeptical about “the acknowledged legislators of the world (who) take the world as given. They dislike mysteries, for mysteries cannot be coded, or legislated, and wonder cannot be made into law” (Okri 1997: 4). . . . “If the poet sings only of our restricted angles and in restricted terms and in restricted language, then what hope is there for any of us in this world?” (5) . . . “The poet’s hunger is our hunger, which is for more life” (7). . . . a “widening of the world towards a vaster, more wondrous reality” (13). The inspiration we need to cultivate, he urges—regularly, especially since “sometimes it comes when we are least prepared” (7), and so as not to fall into a state
where we can’t even remember our last experience of it—is sensitivity to “the quickening of the unknown” (9).

A note may be needed on this old-fashioned imagery. “Quickening” identifies the moment during pregnancy, usually at about sixteen weeks, when the mother first feels the fetus move. At that stage, it is a mild fluttering feeling, which only later begins to feel like a human being’s elbows and knees, somersaults, and responses to loud noises. The most basic meaning of the term “quickening” derives from an old English derivation of the Latin vivere, to live, and the Greek bios, life. “Quick” became “fast” at some later date. So “quickening” refers to a potential but as-yet unknown being. Okri uses the concept to depict how poets continually extend the boundaries of the possible by cultivating a capacity to sense the “quickening of the unknown.”

Extending and reconsidering “the possible” is one central and continuing, while also changing, theme of anthropology (Guyer 2009). At least since Ruth Benedict (1934), we assume that “the possible” already exists in the world; we need to train perception, sense its quickening and then listen to its voice. “Potential” implies the power to grow, so would demand identification not only of the entity itself but also of its capacity to generate something larger. At a yet earlier stage, when I wanted to rethink the kind of “difference” that underlay relativism, in order to carry it forward in some form across paradigm shifts, I had tried “originality” as a substitute term (Guyer 1999). This also came to me from an African artist, the colleague whose recording and transcription of the epic made it available for us to analyze (Guyer and Eno Belinga 1995). S. M. Eno Belinga was an academic geologist and also a lover of traditional music and a composer. He once said, nuancing the orientalist critique, that he actually liked his own culture to be designated as “primitive” in certain respects . . . because it means “first.” As he listened to world music, he explained, he felt that his own was deeply original: primitive in its literal etymological sense. There was nothing like it. Hence my replacement of “difference” by “originality,” which I hoped would retain the unknown as a quality to which one learns to be attentive, without locking it into alterity and without negating the qualities of life, as self-proclaimed, that critical political, race, and gender studies had identified.

The attentiveness of Okri’s poets and Eno Belinga’s musicians to an aspiration to “more life,” beyond “restricted languages,” to an apprehension of originality of all kinds, ab initio as well as enlivened in the moment, is an orientation that we share in the disposition toward the “surprise.” “The unknown” here provokes an epistemology because it declares itself. Okri also has a phrase that parallels in an uncanny way, the goal of ataraxia for the ancient skeptics, whose particular form of empiricism is more persuasive to me than the hypothetical form that—as positivism—comes down through Comte and traditions of the science of the social sciences. Here are Okri’s words, written for the poet and the storyteller: “Tranquility is the resolution of the tensions and paradoxes of story into something beyond story: into stillness” (1997: 116). I quote Richard Bett (2010) here on the classical skeptics’ rationale, which lends itself to the kind of artisanship of life (in our own case, professional life) that I unpack and examine here: “Ancient Greek skepticism has an inherently practical character. . . . This practical aspect is explicit in the Pyrrhonist tradition, all of whose members emphasized the tranquility (ataraxia) the skeptical outlook supposedly engendered, by contrast with the mental turmoil
associated with a dogmatic outlook.” It entails suspension of judgment about “what things are by nature good” (2010: 183), the consideration of “a multitude of conflicting positions” (ibid.: 182), although also a common agreement that some things “are worth pursuing” (ibid.: 183). Or, in our own case, “worth trying to know.”

We can find in recent work on anthropology of event a similar sensibility to this kind of endpoint. Concepts mobilized within dramatic events are deeply layered in their potential to remain open to transformations across the varied spheres relevant to their interpretation and actionability. Critique consists in juxtaposing and interweaving the “transformations” that an event, in this case political events in India, can show: “as a fragment of history it embodies the diverse discourses and practices to which women, pregnancies and children were subject in a period of grave political and civil disorder” (Das 1997: 83). By arriving at similar resting places in argumentation, Joel Robbins writes that anthropology creates events in thought. “At its best, anthropology has always been about bringing unexpected possibilities of human living into scholarly (and sometimes popular) discourse. That is to say, when it works, anthropology should itself produce events in thought” (2010: 650). This kind of concluding point, I suggest here, is of-a-piece with “the quickening of the unknown” as a regular experience in research mode.

So how do we, in anthropology, and drawing self-consciously on the classic skeptics, Hume on empiricism, Okri on poetics, and the practices of our disciplinary forebears, now practice those two moments-of-passion (in Hume’s terms) of responding to quickening and establishing realization? In order to focus on quickening, I take it out of the shadow of the big phenomena such as epiphany and event, and also distance it from a quality already considered as part of the enlightenment tradition, namely “curiosity.” In quickening, again, it is not my own curious mind but my receptive attentiveness to phenomena that declare their own existence that comes forward. With quickening we are always attending to, as Okri puts it, the “more life” than the one we already know. What that life consists of is necessarily left to the encounter to define, through ongoing interaction.

**Surprise: Cases from the history of anthropology**

I take Lewis Henry Morgan first, as one who used the term “surprise” and its analogs more-or-less unreflectively in several key places in his monumental empirical works: observational work with beavers (1868), observational and interactive work with the Iroquois (1851, 1881), massive pattern recognition, in *Systems of consanguinity and affinity* (1871), and an encompassing theoretical scheme in *Ancient society* (1877).

**Lewis Henry Morgan**

When we focus on Morgan’s large compendia in our standard histories of anthropology, we tend to invoke his observational work less often. *The league of the Iroquois* was his first major book-length work, published in 1851. The other ethnography, *Houses and house life of the American Aborigines*, was his last, published in 1881. Both contain the element of “surprise.” In *The league*, Morgan writes of Iroquois religion: “The beliefs . . . when brought together in a connected form, naturally call forth an expression of surprise” (1851: 179) and, as for us, “We have met the red man on the warpath, and not at the fireside. . . . And when his
virtues rise before us, they create surprise, rather than answer expectation, because the standard of estimation is universally unjust” (1851: 180). This surprise provokes Morgan’s reflexive contemplation about our own ignorance, before he moves forward to more description, more texts of prayers of gratitude, and so on. In *Houses and house life*, it is the formulation of his text that conveys a certain surprise about the centrality of the women. Morgan notes the bad fate of anyone who would not notice women’s importance: it was “the matron who supervised [the] domestic economy . . . usually the female portion ruled the house . . . [and] woe to the luckless husband or lover who was too shiftless to do his share of providing” (1881: 65). This mundane domestic moment was clearly witnessed by Morgan and duly recognized as important. The reader imagines the nineteenth-century gentleman noting with surprise the angry disapproval and moral authority of the “matrons” with respect to men of their own generation (no sons mentioned here!). In political life as well, “The women were the great power among the clans, as everywhere. . . . The original nomination of the chiefs always rested with them” (1881: 66). Only after describing several instances of women’s prominence does Morgan move toward how this works in a larger systemic sense.

It is in his observational book on *The American beaver and his works* (1868) that Morgan develops some of his most philosophical ideas. He invokes “the principle of life,” what he then calls “consciousness” (1868: 26), which he suggests—turning us to surprise as an epistemology—“is a mystery . . . a formative power . . . a capacity to be conscious of [one’s] own mental processes.” As a mystery in beavers, we then need to think about consciousness in humans: which he now sees, in *Ancient society* (1871), precisely not as achieving every kind of consummation in his own kind of human, the nineteenth-century bourgeois gentleman. He sees that same personage as, in fact, in a state where “the human mind stands bewildered in the presence of its own creation.” Surprise, bewilderment, and the struggle for consciousness are all present in his mode of engaging with the vast empirical sources he marshaled into his compendia. It is worth pulling out these moments of quickening, before—and independently of—the move Morgan made into patterns, explanations, and theoretical schema. To make any move toward pattern, the questions “what?” and “how?” have been posed, and he notes, at the end, the “bewilderment”—like Hume’s melancholia and delirium?—incurred by proposing a certainty that is a danger to ataraxia, in life and in scholarship.

**Bronislaw Malinowski**

The epistemology of *Argonauts* famously starts with the explanation for Malinowski’s focus on the kula, serving as an injunction to ethnographic work in his own style, namely to study—and this is on page two—what “looms paramount . . . (phenomena whose) importance is fully realized by the tribesmen themselves, whose ideas, ambitions, desires and vanities, are very much bound up with (it)” (Malinowski

2. The whole thought includes the following: “Since the advent of civilization, the outgrowth of property has been so immense, its forms so diversified, its uses so expanding and its management so intelligent in the interests of its owners, that it has become, on the part of the people, an unmanageable power” (1877: 552).
The entire ethnography thereafter is told as a journey, but I leave that well-known issue of genre, to focus on what—exactly—Malinowski does with the “inponderabilia of actual life”: those small and unexpected observations that somehow reveal the sources for what he sees as the most important of anthropology’s tasks. That is to appreciate, for the participant, “the hold which life has on him” and “to have some light shed on our own” ([1922] 1984: 25). In the very last pages of *Argonauts*, “that breath of life and reality that he breathes and by which he lives” ([1922] 1984: 517), an aim uncannily similar to Okri’s ambition for poetry: to show how “more life” is possible.

Here is Malinowski in full empirical mode. He first devotes pages to the famous kula valuables, *vaygu’a* *mwali* and *soulava*, when and how people wear them, show them off, transact them, and so on. But it is at the very end, only about six pages from the final paragraphs about reaching “knowledge,” “tolerance,” and “generosity” ([1922] 1984: 518), that Malinowski describes an event that he surely just happened upon, among those inponderabilia, and which he writes that he saw several times: “A dying man is surrounded and overlaid with valuables,” said to be alternatively a gift to the keeper of the netherworld; evidence of high social standing; or given “to adorn and make happier the last moments of the dying . . . soothing and fortifying . . . I have observed them do it for hours . . . [expressing] the desire to inspire with life; and at the same time to prepare for death . . . but above all, the deep feeling that the *vaygu’a* (valuables) are the supreme comfort” ([1922] 1984: 512–13). They rub the dying man’s body with the *vaygu’a*, place them on his forehead and under his nose. Malinowski offers a photograph of an elderly, emaciated corpse, decorated with kula valuables, cradled by four grieving attendants.

Surely this practice impressed itself on the ethnographer, like a surprise, a moving impression, in the beginning. And then, its reference back to life itself brings a certain sense of “arrival,” and equanimity, to the arc of the argument about the “hold which life has” on us, or in Okri’s terms, the “stillness beyond story,” when paradoxes and complexities are rested.

**Interlude on political arithmetic**

I devote a short passage here to the more familiar strand of empiricist work in social science, namely the quantification that became the hallmark of the “political arithmetic” style of research, directly following Hume, Smith, and Ferguson in the eighteenth century. Frederick Morton Eden, in his voluminous *The state of the poor* (1797), writes of his “personal curiosity” as well as “benevolence” with respect to “the difficulties which the laboring classes experienced, from the high price of grain, and of provisions in general, as well as of clothing [sic] and fuel, during the years of 1794 and 1795” (1797: i). He writes, “The public mind is once more afloat; and, like the dove sent out from the ark, anxiously solicitous to find, if it be possible, amid the surrounding confusion, some spot of permanent tranquility, on which the nation may rest” (1797: v–vi). The biblical poetic imagery for anxiety and the search for tranquility, which seems to give expressive terms to Hume’s theory of knowledge, opens his three-volume work of more than 2,000 pages, analyzing sources from over 200 places and ending with 20 appendices, including legal texts and account books and some individual accounts, offered by particular people.
whom he finds provocative of further thought. He concludes, in classic skeptical manner, at a point where he can look with pleasure on “my Book, however defective, and deliver it to the world, with the spirit of a Man that has endeavoured well” (1797: xxxi). Marx and Engels picked up the work fifty years later, with their own analytical and political project, diverging from Eden’s, who saw himself in the Adam Smith camp with respect to political inference. Eden’s provocation from surprise, however, and his pursuit in empiricist mode, created an intellectual bridge, brought forward again by E. P. Thompson (1963). His reporting of the original sources then became a source for others to analyze in a different mode. From my own reading, I see observations about individual cases that provoke new thoughts.

Poetic inspiration and indigenous epistemologies within the empirical project

The skeptical mode invites imagination in the pauses between passion and reason, and here the poetic image seems to have been aroused particularly explicitly, in some instances. Victor Turner and Mary Douglas both drew on poetic imagination. Attention to indigenous imaginations also enters into those moments of pause-after-surprise, and for this reason I finally turn to Marilyn Strathern’s writings on Melanesia.

Victor Turner

Turner attributes his journey into symbolism to the surprise of hearing drumming, almost wherever he went. In the introduction to The forest of symbols (1967), he writes, “Gradually I became aware of a vast and complicated system of ceremonial practices going on around me somewhat as one picks out the skyline of a distant city in the growing dawn. It was an astonishing and enriching experience” (1967: 2). His subsequent ethnography of ritual symbolism is acknowledged to be among the most masterly in social anthropology. He was, also, himself a poet. His widow Edith has recently made available to us some of his poems. I quote one, because it bears so closely on the theme of working from quickening to thought to uncertainty to resting and stillness.

Here are excerpts from his The psalm of uncertainty from the 1940s (there is no exact date here, but this was written during the time he was a conscientious objector during World War II):

Uncertainties, dark-atoms of a life,
Whip-cord of truth, tracks of the pioneer’s cart . . .
Uncertainties,

How they spatter my page with clues to directions,
Pointers that call for unerring patience. . . .

Shall I continue to cite these elusive, unsteady, impalpable rumors?
I am uncertain as Truth is, pregnant with the unutterable, but
Condemned to utterance and death until Time bring her hour of labor.
Be patient, everyone, this tedious confession
Is just as necessary as geology
To the final meaning,
The final fact.
(Turner 2012: 243–44)

Uncertainty, multiple directions, patience, and a poetic sense of the quickening of pregnancy, are all infused with the inspiration of lively companionship. One could remember Turner’s remarkable article on Muchona the Hornet (1967), which invokes many surprising moments, and acknowledges what a crucial intellectual companion Muchona had been, as Turner explored the logics of “a forest of symbols.” Muchona was himself a skeptical thinker, operating on the margins: a position that he and Turner seemed to recognize in each other, and from which they created the kind of “making merry with friends” that Hume claims extricated him from a melancholy and delirium. Turner and Muchona, in the beginning, “to make the miles go faster we played a game” (1967: 131). In the end, as Turner leaves, “the philosophy don would have to return to the world that could only make a “witchdoctor” of him” (1967: 150). Certainty was now yet more deeply imical. The divinatory imagination had replaced it, but he expected to be downgraded to “witchdoctor” by his scientific colleagues. Configurational logic—from surprise to possibility to figuration and back—had perhaps been downgraded by the systematic empiricism practiced in some domains of science in the twentieth century.

**Mary Douglas**
The work of Mary Douglas often encourages a poetic approach, in the manner of—as she invokes—French surrealist Raymond Roussel. “Somehow the work of art must be made free to produce itself” (Douglas 1975: 138). To prepare for doing this kind of work, she warns against being oversurprised by some obvious general truths in life: “that the pressure of living distorts the actual pattern from its ideal form” (1975: 139). We just notice such “distortions,” one by one, attentively. She notes the commonalities and also differences between French and British practice: the first interested in the form, the second in the pattern, but both in the deviance between the actual and the ideal. So she sees a common sensibility to the quickenings of distortions as they appear, which eventually lead (she argues), through disciplinary traditions, along different analytical pathways. The British burrow into

3. I am indebted to Karin Barber for reminding me of this paper.
4. I read Impressions of Africa ([1910] 2011) by Roussel to deepen my understanding of her point, only to emerge deeply puzzled as to why this particular, gratuitously violent and (to me) meaningless romp would be inspirational to anything at all, or would be treated as exemplary of the surreal. But my own perplexity perhaps underlines the personal element that can enter into the next moment between impression and disciplinary thought: between cautiously asking “what?” and “how?,” and choosing a mode of enquiry apposite to the terms of self-declaration one has understood from the focus of interest. Or perhaps Roussel, for her, was simply an extreme case, to underline her point about freedom of thought.
the underground; the French remain with a fascination with forms. As a result they ask the next questions differently. Here—and this is my own interpretation—the British empiricist tradition and perhaps also American pragmatism, might be more likely to pause for longer on the “how” question than the “what” question. “What?” inspires the search for depiction of a form, perhaps a classificatory approach, and then further search and argument from that step. “How?” inspires the search for a process: how did that happen, how was it configured, understood, enacted, in the life-situation? It is clearly more cognate with, for example, Alfred Gell’s “art and agency” (1998) than depictions of the art objects would be.

Douglas then argues that there is an exemplary figure for the kind of anthropological epistemology of quickening, which has parallels between European and British traditions. Both practice something like the art of the African diviner, although with their different emphases on objects and processes. The diviner works from a mix of questions and perceptions, to which he applies the rigors of a discipline, to result in what she calls “hidden truths.” Two other current Africa-based anthropologists, Richard Werbner and Michael Jackson (himself a poet), have both explored the figure of the diviner in relation to anthropological, and also psychoanalytic (Werbner: n.d.), epistemologies. I might add that Nigerian scholar Niyi Akinnaso (1995) has criticized Bourdieu for his oversecularist theoretical formulations that sideline other sources of knowledge and agency, such as those that exist in Yoruba divination.

In a divinatory epistemology, attentiveness to the small configuration opens up a whole world of meaning, power, and means of moving into the future (often very short term, and to be reconfigured frequently, as desired). The subject matter could be anything at all: from farming and householding to supplicating the ancestors and the gods. Often the diviner then refers to the kind of sacrifice one needs to make in order to move forward. In disciplinary terms, the counterpart might be from surprise to divinatory immersion, to configuration, to focus (the disciplinary hard work along the empirical arc), to a newly informed openness. Here is Michael Jackson on similarity between the diviner and the scientist: “Crucial to this notion of work is the transformation of experience from something private and amorphous into something that is sharable and substantial . . . what matters existentially is that we are enabled to grasp experiences that confound us, react to events that overwhelm us, and become creators rather than mere creatures of circumstance” (2013: 48).

**Melanesian puzzle and wonder: Strathern**

There is a fascinating allusion, early in Strathern’s (2013) masterclass on Learning to see in Melanesia, to the cultivation of initiates’ capacity “to see the art, not so that he may consciously interpret it but so he is directly affected by it” (Anthony Forge quoted in Strathern 2013: 8). Seeing, here, is then a learned skill for even knowing how to become immersed, and thereby affected (impressed?). Decoration reveals what is within: qualities and relationships, and thereby vulnerability. “To have little covering is to be hidden; to be decorated is to be exposed” (2013: 61).

---

5. The highlighting of these qualities is in Giovanni da Col’s (2013) preface to Volume 2 of HAU’s Masterclass Series.
“Images are reflected self-knowledge” (2013: 169). Here, each item reveals something of its own origins. The collective then seems to be “organized” to indicate larger qualities such as “clan growth,” hence Strathern’s close attention to scalar modulation, and inside-outside oscillation in the process of exploration and extrapolation. It is enormously instructive to see how the initial puzzle poses itself in the form of “objects,” which comprise objectified qualities of persons and relationships. We then deconstruct, looking at surprising objects one at a time, and then reconstruct them together in a particular way (Albert 1986: 241 quoted in Strathern 2013: 168): “in the organization of forms . . . and not in some relation between particular forms and their referents.” The point is to learn a certain “receptivity to knowledge” (Strathern 2013: 149) that pauses between the impression and the interpretation, so that our own theory of the world and a compulsion toward a reductive interpretation is not all that we are able to use as a lens for apprehension. Her account ends with a series of questions rather than authoritative conclusions.

In this case, it is the drama of decorative objects that most powerfully dislodges preconceptions and most boldly leads into the next step of disciplinary thought, after surprise. In much African work, it seems to be dramas of action and performance, and the expert mediations of combinatorial logics, in the very initial phases, that have provoked a corresponding pause and recourse to the poetics and other multiple provocations and components to these configurational processes. The surprise and the pauses for thought perhaps occur differently, but they do occur, and at the center of a shared epistemology of surprise on the part of anthropologists that follows certain parallels from one to the other. Both Douglas and Strathern insert indigenous epistemologies into that pause for thought, after the moment of impression. Douglas writes: “It is not fantastic to hope that the fully recorded epistemology of an ancient West African culture should produce a kind of breakthrough for us” (1975: 126). Strathern’s “learning to see” (2013) is an extended exploration of how our surprise can be informed by the people’s own surprise. It would bear much closer examination to put the two regional literatures into even slower slow-motion, to see how place, problematic and the ethnographer’s theoretical orientation create variants in the working from surprise (puzzle, wonder) forward. Returning to Africa-based work, we have an extended reflection on a new empiricism by Michael Jackson that can offer a profound resource.

A new empiricism

Michael Jackson

I turn—as my last example of steps from surprise to argument, working with “the quickening of the unknown”—to Michael Jackson, who explicitly reclaims empiricism under the title “Radical empiricism,” working from William James’ insistence on the centrality of “experience.”

Jackson writes that “if illusions have real and useful consequences then they are truths” (2013: 109). Being itself is invoked: “What we call culture is simply the sum total of the approved forms and images onto which our will-to-be may fasten or cathect, or, to use Husserl’s term, fill itself in or fulfill itself” (2013: 164–65). Interestingly, he draws connections between the different branches of empiricism and continental philosophy, working alongside works such as those of Veena Das in ways that I see as also bringing forward and refining the very practice of attentiveness to quickening that I have visited here in the work of Morgan, Malinowski, Turner, and Douglas.

In appreciating this new work in a radical empiricist mode I want to bring out the two qualities that I have mentioned already as strongly implicit in the skeptical tradition but that were upstaged by a phase of empiricism-as-positivism, and a too-closed commitment to systematicity and proof over the mid-decades of the twentieth century. The new phenomenological empiricism explicitly repatriates the centrality of uncertainty and the provisional nature of arrival. Over the arc of reasoning-from-evidence, the reader is told more than the writer can turn into a singular pattern, an interpretation, an explanation and then a theory—but for various reasons that are never reduced to the sense of failure that the standard of proof would impose. Possibilities may be confidently ruled out, but a singular resolution is no longer expected. We are grateful because it allows us, as readers, to have our own moments—as secondary moments—of quickening to the unknown, and to take part in the interpretive process in our own ways, as generations have done with Eden’s archive. A loose end is left open to us; a “path toward a clearing” does not yet arrive. The excursion, the engagement, and the encounter are left partially open at that chosen moment of “stillness,” of ataraxía, where some judgment is suspended while other judgments may be rested: both at a moment where we can recognize the tranquility of having, in any case, “endeavoured well” (Eden 1797), or as well as we could.

Jackson uses Kuranko folktales as an example of the form of our own ethnographic discourse, where “the cat’s cradle is stretched, tensed, and held between the poles of reality and make believe” and not resolved; “truth is not binding” (1989: 187). “Epistemic shifts . . . grant differential truth values, powers and privileges to different modes of knowledge” (1989: 117).

I rather hesitated to use the following example, but I feel sure—in a visceral way—that it was left there purposefully, as deliberately unresolved, and it illustrates another new reason for allowing settlement to rest rather than resolve at a certain inclusive open-endedness that includes and excludes, but does not conclude, out of respect for the forms of life that still quicken under their own logics, as we go out on our own “excursions” toward and then from them. This one quickened in my own mind as I read Jackson’s reporting of an experience during the civil war in Sierra Leone. He quotes a young woman, Fina, who escaped, after the rebels severed one of her own hands and one of her 6-year-old daughter’s hands. Here is her account (2013: 211–12): “they cut off all our hands . . . Damba said, “Mummy, I am thirsty. . . . I gave Damba some water. Then I sat down and tied her on my back. . . . When they (the RUF) had gone, I found my son, and tied Damba on my back again.” This reader (me) paused here to ask “how?” We feel our way into that question, knowing that it could not be asked, like an interview question, of Fina herself. Our ignorance of mundane skills, such as how to tie a
child on your back under all kinds of circumstances, such as any ordinary inability to use both hands, would be—as Jackson suggests in another place—professionally delinquent. But rather than let it be consigned to something I cannot know, for whatever reason, this scene does provoke this anthropologist, this mother (and grandmother), to tell myself that I cannot possibly fail to know how such a feat was accomplished, either physically or willfully. I must learn from others, watch how they do it under normal circumstances, and be attentive to an utterly routinized “technique of the body” and manner of being-in-a-relationship-of-responsibility that, under these particular devastating circumstances, informed a mundane gesture that probably stood between life and death. Maybe someone else helped her. That, too, is crucial. But in the new empiricism, it is ours to be observant, and to learn indirectly by working at experiential inhabitation of the places where reason and passion meet; it is not ours to ask directly, interview-style.

Thanks to a student’s recent work, I can add the following, from the penultimate paragraph of an article on “Agency and pain” by Talal Asad (2000) that would also be directly relevant to the episode that Jackson reports. This passage from his modest “some sort of a conclusion” (2000: 51), stresses exactly the “what?” and “how?” questions about “life” that I am focusing on throughout the lecture. The parallels with a skeptical empiricism, at least at this moment of exposure to quickening, are very close, which then can illustrate my suggestion that we share and can mutually critique some elements of a common craft, across many theoretical, historical, and domain-specific worlds. Here “pain” and “sanity,” as versions of passion and reason, encounter and engage with each other.

What story is the agent a part of? . . . How is the speech of agents . . . normalized and disciplined? . . . In what ways does pain make for different kinds of agency? . . . The questions are directed at how the “human” . . . is historically realized and socially endowed with consciousness as well as autonomy and how different traditions articulate the possibilities for living sanely in a painful world. (Asad 2000: 52)

The second quality that Jackson’s empiricism brings out, as he gives up on the systematicity of mainstream empiricism, is how he defines the eventual “stillness” where arguments based from experience come to a resting place. Jackson arrives at horizons. In Paths toward a clearing he defines the “clearing” as “a break in a journey—to take stock, to get my bearings” (1989: 1, the first sentence). The last paragraph of the book concludes, “truth . . . is in the interstices as much as in the structure” (1989: 187). In Barawa, he ends on the edge of the sea: “Moving along the tide line, he [Michael] looked down into a film of water that reflected pale gray clouds in a cocoa-colored sky and now began to slide and sail under him.

---

6. Anila Daulatzai, a graduate of Johns Hopkins, who researches experience and “ordinary ethics,” especially of women and children, in Kabul, Afghanistan, in the context of endless war.

7. I thank Giovanni da Col for the following suggestion. It was Heidegger who employed first the concept “clearing” (Lichtung) to highlight temporal moments of reorientation of Being. Heidegger was inspired by the Holzwege, the “paths leading to nowhere” made by foresters and hunters in the woods. For the philosopher, losing oneself on a Holzweg entailed finding oneself in surprising and unexpected places.
so that he felt he was upside-down, or treading air, bound to nothing” (1986: 204, insert added). The poetic voice evokes the sense of suspension in stillness.

The parallels with ancient and Humean skepticism seem striking: no method of inquiry yields infallible results but we nevertheless live in forward motion. Views on an epistemology of surprise from Africa and from Melanesia can enrich the range of possible directions to take, in the pauses of thought. In Jackson’s work, we are still on the move, taking steps, in an as-yet unknown direction: perhaps into “interstices,” in divinatory mode. For Strathern, the final questions are less about direction than about depth of immersion: “Why are objects produced for display, or (for that matter) for nondisplay? Why is attention being paid to appearance?” (Strathern 2013: 149). The point for me here is to see these as variants of a transverse shared practice of epistemologies of surprise and experience, which are then available for mobilization as befits place, subject matter, moment in history, and theoretical disposition.

Fragments and incompletions, gaps and absences

I have briefly invoked the surprise of the fragment already, where a phenomenon provokes the sense that there is something larger: either a unity now broken, or a phase in an unseen encompassing narrative, or something absent because violently destroyed. Taussig (2004) draws on Benjamin to identify fragments as provocations to empirical examination. My focus on the imagery of the quickening of a form of life, perhaps too powerfully implicitly sidelines this surprise of the gap, in ethnography—including Taussig’s—where a political sensibility is at work. Kathleen Stewart’s ethnography of Appalachian coal miners explicitly focuses on “the gap”—“at the side of the road”—where the space “between signifier and signified (is where) . . . the names and meanings of things are never fully present” (1996: 88). It is not a lively presence by a remarkable absence that strikes her mind. Things that used to be, no longer are; loopholes open up; ignorance seems crafted. Indeed Jackson also points out that critical thinking is analogous to critical life situations, particularly when the surprises are “shock, disorientation, dismay, anxiety, and even trauma” (personal communication).

Most recently, Graeber (2012) has identified what he calls “dead zones”: in life and in theory. He is frankly astonished at his own “stupidity” at not noticing a minor bureaucratic slip, an expert’s failure to notice it, and the chasm of nonentity into which one can fall as a result. These “dead zones” are precisely not the “more life” of the poetic aspiration and empirical provocation gained from surprises in a world that can be identified in positive terms. Dead zones are something of their own kind, but noticed by a similar epistemology of surprise. If it impresses and dislodges the mind, then it provokes disciplinary thought. His paper is shot through with surprise in these absences of life. He starts with a narrative of which he writes, “At the time, I found this experience extremely disconcerting” (2012: 107), and later his own reactions are “disturbing” (2012: 108). Once disturbed, the anthropological record is examined to see what we have made of such dead zones. And the answer is “not much,” except for feminism. The reason, he argues, is that “anthropologists are particularly inclined to confuse interpretive depth with social significance” (2012: 116). The resting place, for Graeber, goes from surprise to “simplifying and schematizing complex material in such a way as to be able to say something unexpected” (2012: 116) about the world. And one of those unexpected claims is that such dead zones actually exist, are created by
identifyable processes, and have social implications in the maintenance of ignorance and intimidation.

Clearly Graeber is making quite different theoretical arguments from others I have discussed. And yet it seems to me that there are commonalities in the argumentation that starts from what is, and surprisingly is not; from what overtakes us and thereby compels deeper immersion and closer attention to depth, configurations, and the power of process. How others pursue the provocation of surprise, in whatever terms, then becomes an available source for inspiration from the “wayside” that turns up, like Muchona, or is sought out, like colleagues and interlocutors, on the way “toward a clearing.”

I end with two examples of quickening in my own work on money, in political-economic and historical projects. These were moments that opened up whole new endeavors.

**Political economy and materialist history**

*Ntet*: What is “a hundred”?

I was trying to quantify the Southern Cameroonian currency of the past, these small iron spears known simply as *bikie* (which just means “metal object,” in the plural). The *bikie* were tied up in bundles with raffia for making transactions. In current everyday Beti language, *ntet* is one hundred. But when I counted the packages in the museum collections, they were puzzlingly varied in composition. Then studying the written sources I found Mary Kingsley’s description (1897: 320–21), with a picture of only three, tied intricately, and the following description: “*bikei*—little iron axe-heads which are tied up in bundles called *ntet*, 10 going to one bundle, for with *bikei* must the price of a wife be paid” (quoted in Quiggin 1949: 71) (Figure 1).

![Figure 1: Southern Cameroon currency zones in the nineteenth century.](image-url)
How is that possible? I looked up *ntet* again in an old dictionary compiled by Cameroonian scholar and priest Abbé Théodore Tsala, to find that it was also the name of a certain kind of openwork basket. And when I was searching through archival photographs in the Peabody Museum at Harvard University I found one labeled “Ntet.” (Figure 2). It was a large open-work basket whose knotting closely resembles the raffia-ties that bundle the *bikie* in the old sources. Clearly it is a mode of tying: not even an object (“bundle”) let alone a word for the abstraction of number, but an action of artisanship (for further discussion see Guyer 2012: 2217–18).

![Figure 2: Ntet basket and headpad. Courtesy of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University (Peabody ID#2004.24.6671, digital file 13225004).](image-url)

That juxtaposition of Mary Kingsley’s drawing and George Schwab’s photograph quickened my mind and provoked a line of search: from the literal *how?* of the tying up, to the *how* of the “marginal gains” (Guyer 2004) that are made in transactions, and then to *how* “number (is an) inventive frontier” in the cultural life of the present (Guyer, Khan, and Obarrio 2010).

To schematize the sparking fuse that this quickening has lit:

Questions about number start from a quickening, then pass through culture, language, and poetic evocations; to numeration, equivalence, and exactitude in transactions; to a philosophical register in modal logic, possible worlds theory, and the question of number’s stability across modes. What is number, then? These questions return me to new reading on African number (e.g., Bangura 2012), and new possible *companions de voyage* in classical textual studies, cognitive science, and archaeology (such as Urton 1997 on Inca *khipu*). One of these companions
has been Helen Verran (2001), whose own radical experiment with number was propelled by a classroom surprise, while teaching Yoruba children in Nigeria. They were using a numeration system that assumed whole-part rather than one-many frames, with benchmark numbers such as twenty to indicate thresholds. Verran’s suggestion that we turn to modal logic, the analysis of statements that take the form of “it is possible that . . .,” opens up an intellectual horizon for engagement with quantification itself, and to revisit the concept of the “possible.”

Kos’owo
My other example, kos’owo, is a term I heard in rural Nigeria in the 1980s. It means literally “there’s no money,” so it is an observation of absence. I thought it was another way of saying “we’re poor,” but since one can express poverty by another terms (ise), kos’owo quickened in my mind, remained there, and then jumped into action as I started to work on macromoney issues in recent years. Running across an episode diagnosed as “kos’owo” in field work in 2010, I worked on it with Kabiru Salami (2011), then organized another excursion into the whole routine, mundane—but very large macro—as well as micro-question—of the money supply, and started to think about the classic functions of money in “moral economy” terms. Money does not just have functions, in a passive way. Its uses are highly crafted. I wanted to explore how money remains a medium of exchange, as cash, under the circumstances when its function as a store of wealth is syphoning off a higher and higher proportion of total monetary value into inactivity or very limited circuits of circulation. A single phrase—“there’s no money”—opened up new reading of the economic classics on the quantity theory of money and the velocity of circulation. Copernicus was the first to theorize that quantity needed to be monitored by the state, for the preservation of the value of goods against inflation. Velocity would then determine how many transactions could be made, with that mass of money, in a particular unit of time. “There’s no money” can then be a statement about the velocity, and the specific circuits, of circulation rather than the total money mass. Popular Nigerian theory has it that the rich are literally holding the money out of circulation, in bags and suitcases. This leads us back into theory and practice in economics, in order to compare to popular theory and practice with respect to “the money supply” and the velocity of circulation under conditions of great wealth disparity, where there are many modes of holding money in its function as a store of value.

Conclusion
Much is embedded in practice, as science studies has noted. Our attentiveness to an epistemology of surprise appears characteristic of anthropology, across many divides. It derives from empiricism, and its recognition is now strongest in the radical empiricism of Michael Jackson, the insistence that we see dead zones (Graeber 2012) and fragments (several theorists), as well as still being embodied in the inherited empiricist practices we all learned along the way on our own “paths toward a clearing.” It privileges experience as a source of knowledge, which Jackson now leavens with strands from continental philosophy as well as American

8. It is worth noting that both Urton and Verran comment on ontology.
pragmatism. His practice follows closely the ancient skeptics’ notion, in that it moves, not toward the authoritative voice and proof of a modernist empiricism that is based on hypothetical reasoning from prior definitions, passing through the controls of experiment, to proof. But rather it works toward an intellectual version of *ataraxia*, equanimity with the limits to knowledge, or with Ben Okri’s “stillness.”

By virtue of repeated surprises, we can engage many others who will grasp the instance as a provocation, address and critique it in their own terms, and allow us to travel with them to a place where the still viable—“alive”—possibilities can be brought together and rested, in a state like that of *ataraxia*. By then, nonviable resolutions have been abandoned, on principled and argued grounds, but others remain open for consideration. This, I suggest, is detectable in older and more widely practiced disciplines-of-the-mind that come down from Hume and through Morgan, Malinowski, and—very importantly—our African colleagues in poetry and divination, Melanesian thinkers, and all our interlocutors and companions in the various fields in which we work. The specific ways in which surprise and equanimity have been mediated in particular instances, through interlocutors and processes of reasoning and reflection, is a matter for collegial artisanship to examine, case-by-case. I suggest that anthropologists’ disciplined anticipation that “the unknown” may “quicken” is one of our great contributions.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to the Department of Social Anthropology, University of Edinburgh, for the invitation to deliver the Munro Lecture for May 9, 2013, for the provocation it provided to revisit the themes addressed here, and for their responses to them. Conversations with Richard Baxstrom about these and other themes were particularly helpful. Karen Sykes helped me with references on British empiricism, and Richard Bett with works on ancient Greek philosophy. As HAU editor, Giovanni da Col made many important suggestions, both on the argument as a whole and on specific points, a couple of which are noted in the footnotes. Three other people have read the entire draft text of the lecture, each providing me with unique and illuminating suggestions: Anand Pandian, Michael Jackson, and Michael Krausz. I have not answered all their suggestions, but may all those conversations continue! It was my expectation and hope, from the lecture format, that suggestive but underexplored points could be taken further and in more depth.

The original spark for this work was the invitation of Eileen Julien and Biodun Jeyifo to participate in their conference and collection. I am grateful to the Peabody Museum at Harvard University for access to the collections and permission to publish the photograph.

9. I would like to add here the Hindu musical concept of niasa that I learned from my colleagues Veena and Ranen Das when I was once struggling, in a seminar, for a term for this moment at the end of a phase of thought. It refers to a phase in the *ragas* where the music rests before resuming. Doubtless there are other concepts, in other intellectual traditions, that would draw together and add provocative nuances of evocation to the overlaps and differences between *ataraxia*, stillness, and niasa.
References


« L’animation de l’inconnu ». Épistémologies de la surprise en anthropologie

Résumé : Mon titre est celui d’un essai de l’écrivain nigérian Ben Okri, qui évoque un aspect de l’empirisme classique en anthropologie que je trouve particulièrement important et souhaite aborder ici, à savoir l’élément de surprise, ou « impression » (Hume), comme instigateur de pensée. L’animation est le moment où un être donne la preuve de sa propre vie et de sa présence. Une épistémologie de la surprise a été largement et fréquemment pratiquée en anthropologie, comme cela est illustré dans des œuvres de domaines et orientations théoriques divers. Des variations dans les conventions de l’instigation et de l’achèvement sont retracées à travers les pratiques des anciens sceptiques et des philosophes du dix-huitième siècle ; elles sont ensuite reliées aux aspects artisanaux, poétiques, et artistiques au sein de la discipline à travers son histoire ; puis comparées à l’imagerie dans les œuvres classiques d’Afrique et de Mélanésie ; et enfin explorées plus récemment dans « l’empirisme radical » de Michael Jackson et des œuvres politiquement orientées qui mettent l’accent sur les fragments, les lacunes et les absences plutôt que sur les présences. La conférence se conclut avec des exemples de l’animation tirés de mon propre travail sur l’économie politique—une confusion déconcertante de référents pour un terme numérique au Cameroun, et une saisissante affirmation nigériane qu’« il n’y a pas d’argent » dans un monde monétisé à l’échelle globale—montrant la large applicabilité de ce mode de raisonnement, dont la généalogie remonte à Hume et à l’empirisme sceptique grec.
Jane I. GUYER is George Armstrong Kelly Professor in the Department of Anthropology at Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore. A graduate of the London School of Economics and the University of Rochester, she has undertaken field research in Nigeria and Cameroon, and served on the faculty of Harvard, Boston University, and Northwestern University.

Jane I. Guyer
Department of Anthropology
404 Macaulay Hall
Johns Hopkins University
Baltimore, MD 21218, USA
410-516-4690
jiguyer@jhu.edu