Politics and Practice in Critical Anthropology: The Work of Richard B. Lee—Introduction

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This volume is a modest offering of esteem and affection to Richard Lee in celebration of his work, his politics, his friendship, his enthusiasm and of the inspirational impact these have had on so many of us, not only those represented in this volume but on many others within and outside of the academy. The current issue developed out of a series of sessions organized by Christine Gailey and me for the 2001 joint meetings of the Canadian Anthropology Society, the American Ethnological Society and the Society for Cultural Anthropology in Montreal to mark Lee's impending retirement (2004) from the University of Toronto where he has been on the faculty since 1972 and where, in 1999, he was granted the prestigious position of University Professor. Thus this *Festschrift* does not signify the closure of a career, but rather a transition in which Lee will no doubt continue to collaborate with colleagues, mentor and train young anthropologists, conduct fieldwork, produce scholarly work and remain a political activist. In Gailey's words:

> In its original sense a *Festschrift* is a celebration in writing by people who have drawn on and grown to appreciate the work of a major figure, at a time when he or she can respond and contribute further to the discussions for which the honoree is so pivotal. For Richard Lee, this demands that writers address a range of issues and controversies that are far from concluded, areas of debate that point to the vitality of a four-fields approach in anthropology and long-term, socially engaged field research, with both agendas committed to redressing oppression. Only in such a way can we ensure that later generations will have an alternative view to seeing human nature as either a biological reflex or a narrow range of attributes serving a global imperium. (personal communication)

Many of the papers were delivered in preliminary form at the 2001 conference and some have been added.[1] In addition, Gailey conducted an extensive interview

with Lee in 2002; from this she has produced an intellectual biography that follows this introduction. Gailey provides a window into Lee's life enabling us to better understand and appreciate the array of factors and circumstances such as family, education, the radicalized political context of the 1960s and the anti-war movement that have shaped the direction of Lee's life's work. The articles in this volume, written for Lee, each touch upon one or more of the various theoretical, ethnographic and the political strands that run through his work and, more importantly, upon the ways in which these merge seamlessly in Lee's "career" (broadly conceived). The specific papers and their relation to Lee's oeuvre will be referred to below.

Art, Science and Politics

In his important 1992 article, "Art, Science, or Politics? The Crisis in Hunter-Gatherer Studies" published in *American Anthropologist*, Lee evokes Snow's distinction between the supposedly irreconcilable "humanistic and scientific" academic subcultures. I wish to borrow and slightly twist Lee's title in order to suggest that his work and that of those with whom he collaborated in the Kalahari and elsewhere have sought to bridge the gulf explicit in Snow's dichotomy. Lee's work, in particular, not only embraces and effectively synthesizes both tendencies but it does so without getting lost in the singular logic of either or indulging in either's excesses. To Snow's distinction, I wish to add, as did Lee, politics. Lee's commitment to social justice, to a politically engaged anthropology, and to activism within and outside of the academy have been consistent hallmarks of his work and practice. In different ways, the majority of the articles in this volume reflect these ideals and practices.

Lee's unwavering resolve to understand the nature of human equality and to strive towards its realization underlie his political praxis. The optimism inherent in this position does not spring from naïveté but rather from a mature and seasoned realism that endures despite the difficult times and challenging moments that Lee has encountered (see Gailey, this volume). Like many progressive scholars of his generation, Lee has witnessed "heroes and heroic regimes" dissolve into the ordinary, or worse, criminal; he has withstood the cynical prism through which his work has sometimes been viewed; has experienced a historical period in which activist politics were increasingly marginalized (if not trivialized) by right wing governments and sentiments in the university and beyond; and he has suffered personal tragedy. Yet, despite all, his optimism endures and casts an enabling light onto others. He greets new opportunities, new ideas and new people with zeal. In particular, students have always appreciated his enthusiasm: he not only made us feel welcome, he made us feel interesting.

Ethnographic Impetus to Theory

Lee's most enduring legacy will be the remarkable corpus of ethnographic work and its impetus to theory that stem from his long-term Kalahari research and from the scholars he inspired, encouraged and mentored. The San[2] and the body of ethnography that has emerged about them join a small group of ethnographic cases (including the Trobriand Islanders, the Nuer, etc.) that have provided the stimulus for important anthropological theorizing, debate and restudy. The San have been subject to study and restudy in large part because they are intrinsically interesting, but so are all people. The quality and reliability of Lee's and his colleagues' data have invited further study and enabled restudy to be especially productive. Moreover, the San have generated interest in large part because of the richness of Lee's ethnography and the extremely important theoretical questions that he has asked of his material and that others have been inspired and provoked to ask of it.

Lee's early work challenged long held assumptions that hunter-gatherer life was "nasty, brutish and short." Through rigorous empirical research, Lee demonstrated the security inherent in a foraging subsistence base.[3] Sahlins took Lee's material to advance his extremely significant concept of the "Original Affluent Society" which he first presented at the 1966 Man the Hunter Conference organized by Lee and DeVore and later refined in his 1972 book, *Stone Age Economics* (see also Gailey and Susser, this volume). Using Lee's material, Sahlins was able to pose important questions regarding the ubiquity of the market principle as the mechanism of economic integration in society. At the time, the debate between the formalist and substantivists loomed large in anthropology. To simplify, the formalists adopted a position that viewed the economy as composed of (individual) humans attempting to fulfil unlimited wants with limited ends while the substantivists argued that the economy constituted a category of culture that represented the "material life process of society" (Sahlins, 1972: xii). This particular debate no longer exercises the attention of anthropologists with the same vigour, but questions (or, in most cases, the blind acceptance) of the universality of the market principle as the basis of the economy remain central not only in academia but in the offices of governments and institutions that have a profound impact upon the daily lives

of people throughout the world. The implicit assumption that the economy consists of "autonomous" individuals making choices (on an even playing field) regarding the most effective means to allocate their scarce resources guides these institutions and their planning. In the current neo-liberal moment the assumption of market universality is joined by the concomitant normative notion that peoples' well being will be enhanced by granting them even greater autonomy in making such choices. These ideas influence and guide not only the policies of our own governments but also those of the multilateral institutions that dictate to the governments of poor countries. Such assumptions about the nature of the economy lead ultimately to policies that, for instance, force poor Ghanaian villagers to decide between utilizing their scant cash for water (that is being privatized as a result of World Bank policies) or school fees, or food, or medical care. For this and a host of other reasons, the lessons of "the original affluent society" and its inherent critique of market universality remain highly salient.

Lee's early research was influenced by cultural ecology and evolutionary studies; his work stands as a paradigm of these approaches and became the exemplar for many who sought to apply similar research methods and analytic tools in the Kalahari and elsewhere. The interdisciplinary Kalahari project that Lee and DeVore initiated in 1963 had the explicit goal of developing as complete a picture as possible of the hunting and gathering way of life. Their work and the 1966 Man the Hunter conference that they organized provided the foundation for ongoing interrogation and theorizing of the very concept and existence of the category "hunter-gatherer." Hunter-gatherer (forager) studies is now well established with regular international conferences, ongoing research and debate, and productive internal critiques. If some of this work is in counterpoint to Lee's, this reveals that the significance of his work lies not only in the models and data that it has provided but also in its role as stimulus to further reflection, question, debate and critical scholarship.

The Theoretical and Ethnographic Basis of Egalitarianism

Lee's early ethnography provided a critical contribution to the rise of feminist anthropology (see Gailey, Susser and Patterson, this volume). By using his own careful measurements and comparative data from other foraging societies, Lee revealed the importance of collected foods in relation to meat in most forager diets. In fact, in acknowledging that a greater proportion of the San diet was supplied by collected vegetable foods, Lee challenged the appropriateness of the term hunter-gathering society and switched to foraging society in many of his writings. By exposing women's subsistence role in San society, Lee and others were able to question the received wisdom that posited hunting and the division of labour upon which it was predicated, including male predominance, as the evolutionary basis of human social organization. In addition, Lee provided ethnographic evidence of women's political centrality and in doing so contributed to dispelling stereotypes of "primitive patriarchy."[4] His Kalahari colleague, Pat Draper, provided further ethnographic support in an important article that appeared in one of the formative volumes of feminist anthropology (Draper, 1975). In it she offers observation and analysis of greater sexual egalitarianism amongst foraging as opposed to sedentary San.

In the 1980's Lee's theoretical framework shifted explicitly to Marxist political economy with an emphasis upon examining the social and economic basis of egalitarianism. With Eleanor Leacock, he published works that affirmed Marx's construct of "primitive communism" and explored its ethnographic foundations. They argued for the existence of societies that have the capacity to reproduce themselves while limiting the accumulation of wealth and power and they attempted to identify the structures that enabled such societies to do so. Trigger, Gailey and Patterson (and, less directly, Susser) address this aspect of Lee's work. Gailey examines Marx's *Ethnological Notebooks* and illustrates how Marx distinguished "communal" based social formations such as those of foraging groups from those of peasants and saw in the former possibilities for an emancipatory future.

Trigger's and Patterson's observations emerge from a similar spirit; they pay special attention to assertions regarding the "nature" of human nature that many wish to put forward on the basis of forager ethnography. Because many observers view contemporary foragers as a prism through which to glimpse human origins, easy licence is taken in asserting assumptions about "primordial" humans as either "noble savages" or "nasty brutes." Sylvain's paper also draws attention to the impact Lee's work has had for re-examining a Hobbesian notion of human nature. She then takes the discussion forward by differentiating ideas of human nature from those of identity and interrogating the latter in relation to San studies. Patterson identifies liberal views whose theoretical genealogy lies, in particular, with Locke and contrasts them with those emerging from a Marxist tradition. Patterson includes many of Lee's critics (the "revisionists") with the former who grant analytic privilege to the sphere of exchange while the latter

grant theoretical primacy to that of production. In so doing, the "revisionists" foreground San relations with encompassing and extractive political economies in which San relations with one another appear largely as a function of their external subordination. Lee, on the other hand, by keeping the primary (but not exclusive) gaze on production is able to illustrate the means by which San are able to inhibit both political and economic inequality despite the fact (not because of it as some critics would have) the San were enmeshed in power relations not of their own making.

Trigger not only poses questions about the inherent "goodness" or lack of it in human nature but also ponders the degree to which there might be a biological basis to human nature and thus limits to its social construction. Trigger acknowledges the openness of his questions and the difficulties in answering them. But he implores progressive anthropologists to consider the degree to which people in complex capitalist societies might fashion social structures and living arrangements that promote a more equitable sharing of wealth despite a basic human nature that may be less flexible than we may wish to believe. One of the reasons Trigger finds the San material so compelling is because of this political commitment that he shares with Lee. Amongst the San, as depicted by Lee, one finds no "noble savage" occupying an original utopia, but rather a group of people who actively resist the rise of inequality. They possess and deploy a set of rules or "instruments" that are, to borrow Clastres' term, "anti-state"; their existence illustrates, within important limits, the possible.

Praxis

Several articles illustrate Lee's commitment to a politically engaged anthropology. Some highlight the connection between theorizing and practice by asking what an emancipatory anthropology might look like. Biesele and Susser draw attention to Lee's Southern African activism while Brodkin's paper addresses a more deeply rooted foundation of his politics. With respect to Lee, to herself and to many other progressive Jewish activists, she asks "What kind of Jewishness do Jews create when they pursue social justice as Jews in North America today?" Brodkin identifies at least two strands of Jewish political activism that are constructed on the basis of different sets of narratives. Some emphasize the Holocaust and solidarity with Israel while others hark back to memories of immigrants working in sweatshops and to union struggles. Collective memories amongst the latter have been further radicalized through the infusion of feminist politics. Despite the class status they now occupy, the praxis of contemporary Jews such as Brodkin and Lee places them in the latter category. As Brodkin illustrates, although most progressive Jews no longer share direct identification with oppressed peoples in North America they can "perform identity work" that enables them to share in their struggles.

Ethnography

Few are as accomplished in the art of ethnography as Lee. His beautifully vivid and empathetic account of Kalahari peoples' changing lives has set a high ethnographic standard that few can match (the number of times key articles such as "Eating Christmas in the Kalahari" and the undergraduate ethnography first published as *The Dobe !Kung* have been reprinted is evidence of this as is the fact that his first ethnography, *The !Kung San: Men, Women and Work in a Foraging Society* won the prestigious Hersokvits award). Generations of anthropology undergraduates have come to appreciate a non-western society by reading his work. Through documentaries and other materials the wider public has also been presented with a sensitive account of an African society. Whether describing foraging practices, naming relationships, sexuality, or the politics and poetics of vanity and humility surrounding the presentation of a Christmas ox, Lee's fine attention to detail, lively descriptions and engaging portrayals of the vitality of San life have given his work a central place in the ethnographic record. As a result, the San are arguably the most thoroughly documented and well-understood group in Africa.

Lee's work, especially the earlier ecologically oriented writings, employed rigorous scientific methodology. He counted, measured, weighed and quantified. Lee seemed to have a natural gift for this sort of work; for instance, how many people could eyeball the weight of an ox within five to ten kilos?[5] He produced models that aided in the understanding of San society, of other hunter-gatherer societies and of sociocultural evolution. The Kalahari project has inspired subsequent team research endeavours such as the Harvard Ituri project. As a result of the team based nature of the research and Lee's generosity, the integrity of his meticulously collected data and analyses have been scrutinized repeatedly by other team members and have stood the test of time.

Perhaps it is Lee's brilliance as an ethnographer, his ability to keep multiple methodological balls in the air at any given time, and the widespread academic and public recognition of his work, in addition to the role San material has played in theory building, that have made him

and his work such a lightning rod—a flashpoint—for criticism and discontent. In the 1980's Lee's early ethnography as well as the evolutionary analytic framework that informed it came under increasing criticism. Claiming that he neglected San incorporation into coercive world power structures and arguing that their egalitarianism was a product of their subservience and not a *sui generis* phenomenon, "revisionist" scholars prompted a lively "Kalahari debate" (see Patterson and Gailey, this volume). Lee answered their challenge through detailed historical research (some of it conducted with authors in this volume such as Solway and, especially, Guenther) and by refining theoretical models of egalitarianism. As a result of the debates in which Lee and others engaged, our knowledge of Kalahari peoples and the models deployed in their analysis have become more sophisticated.

Lee first went to the Kalahari as a graduate student in 1963 and has returned numerous times since. He went again shortly after the conference upon which this volume is based in 2001 and was preparing for another fieldwork stint in 2003 as it was going to press. Long-term fieldwork presents many opportunities but also many challenges. A scholar who returns to the same research location for several decades bears the traces of a succession of academic paradigms, theoretical orientations and, especially in Lee's case, an ever changing and growing number of fellow fieldworkers. He or she is faced with the difficult task of disentangling changes in the object from those of the scholar-observer (Haugerud and Solway, 2000). The extent to which longitudinal research produces a greater sense of depth, or paradoxically, a greater sense of superficiality for the researcher is open to debate. But this is why long-term field research is important; it subverts our "isms," it mitigates against the smugness of the present, and it reminds us, to borrow Sara Berry's phrase that "no condition is permanent" (1993).

In the close to four decades that Lee has visited the Kalahari the pace of change has been breathtaking, complex, heartening and disheartening, and I would think, at times, bewildering. Many of the changes are cited in Hitchcock's and Biesele's articles and they form the backdrop to the articles of Guenther, Sylvain, and Susser. It has not always been easy or comforting to witness the transformations, but Lee has carefully documented the changes in livelihood strategies, participation in formal institutions and structures, social conditions, local and national political dynamics and so on. Despite the criticisms of some, Lee has never viewed the San as stone age relics. Each new version of his ethnography portrays the San as modern subjects in the new states of Southern Africa.

The legacy of Lee's Kalahari work not only finds expression in a voluminous output of books, articles, reviews, documentary films and in newspaper and other popular forms to which he has had direct input, but also, and significantly, it finds expression in the work of all of the ethnographers that have followed in his footsteps. They have been animated by not only his written work but most have been inspired and/or tutored by him personally. Few scholars have been as generous with their time, fieldnotes, language skills and good will as Lee. His unbounded enthusiasm and substantial support have provided an enabling context for scores of Kalahari researchers. Some have articles in this volume. Not all Kalahari researchers that have been influenced by Lee are included here—indeed if we were to do so we would need several volumes. Instead, we have included a representative group whose work spans half a century of Kalahari research. We begin with Elizabeth Marshall Thomas who travelled to Namibia (then Southwest Africa) with her extraordinary family to conduct fieldwork amongst the San initially in 1951. Renée Sylvain, a student of Lee's who completed her thesis in 1999, returned from the northern Namibian bush four days prior to the Montreal session upon which this volume is based. I suspect that in the 50 intervening years between Thomas' first research and Sylvain's 2001 return, there have been few, if any, years that at least one of us has not been in the Kalahari.

Thomas' paper draws upon her early 1950s fieldwork to highlight the exceptional relationship, or set of "understandings," that existed between the San and the local lions. This "Bushman/lion truce" that she describes no longer exists but that it did is fascinating and crucial to document. Thomas' paper depicts a past Kalahari and one that she observed only in the "Nyae Nyae" interior. The remaining Kalahari based papers are situated in the wider set of relations and present day circumstances, life and dilemmas of contemporary San.

Biesele's paper chronicles the Kalahari project's remarkable legacy of activism. The Kalahari Peoples Fund (KPF), founded in 1973 and based on publication royalties and donations, has facilitated a wide array of activities designed to promote San empowerment. Efforts have been directed towards enhancing livelihood opportunities, leadership development, the struggle for land rights, education and language development and numerous other projects. Increasingly, San are defining their own development priorities, assuming managerial responsibilities while western-based KPF workers are

moving happily further to the background. Hitchcock picks up on this theme by highlighting San land struggles and the range of methods the San, along with their neighbours, deploy in asserting their rights. Success has been mixed but some initiatives such as the various mapping projects appear to be bearing fruit and give one hope for seeing greater San empowerment. Hitchcock's paper gives the reader a good sense of the complex mix of characters (multi-ethnic local, government and expatriate) as well as the various levels (local, regional, state, international and global) that interact in the world of San activism.

Guenther's and Sylvain's papers address issues of theoretical and political importance regarding San identity at the turn of 21st-century post-Apartheid, post-cold war Southern Africa where, as elsewhere, questions of identity and recognition are becomingly increasingly foregrounded and increasingly politicized. The contested terrain of San identity and some of the means by which they attempt to navigate it are addressed by Guenther and Sylvain. Guenther's paper highlights the dilemma faced by San, who despite their participation in the contemporary everyday world, are continually recast as primitive by a public that wishes to ossify them as living fossils. His paper also follows nicely upon Biesele's as it illustrates a variety of San organizations and NGO's, some in which expatriate involvement is central and another that is run solely by San. Guenther's paper exposes a paradox of San artists, who live and work in a very modern world, but cannot escape the western hegemonic perspective that will only view them and their work through a primitivist lens. The western art consuming audience does this by rejecting artistic pieces that incorporate "modern" images and thus do not conform to outsiders' vision of the San as "primordial" noble savages. More nefarious, is the refusal to grant creativity to individual artists and instead to credit the "culture" with "authorship" of the works.

Sylvain addresses dilemmas faced by the Omaheke San of Namibia who have long been employed as farm labourers. Increasingly their political fortunes have been tied to the politics of recognition. Sylvain explores the identity dilemmas faced by the Omaheke in a number of arenas that tend to mutually reinforce one another. Their fortunes vis à vis the state of Namibia, their circumstances of employment, their relationships with NGO's and the like, and their place in the scholarly literature tend to hinge upon a number of contrasting sets of identities. For instance, are the Omaheke "indigenous peoples" or an underclass (and thus invisible to the blossoming NGO world), must they be defined by their cultural characteristics or class characteristics, and why must these categories be seen, as they so often are in and outside the academy, as mutually exclusive? By what standards of "authenticity" are these categories to be measured and who has the authority to set the standards? As Sylvain points out in her eloquently argued piece, the consequences for the Omaheke are not simply "academic." Sylvain's paper demonstrates the political, practical and theoretical pitfalls of being forced to categorize (and often essentialize) the Omaheke San as either an "underclass" or as "indigenous." In addressing these timely questions, Sylvain provides significant insights that add a new analytic layer to the Kalahari debate.

Susser and Lee, in collaboration with Southern African scholars and practitioners, are currently engaged in applied research in the struggle against HIV/AIDS. Southern Africa has the highest prevalence of documented HIV positive cases in the world. Given that analysts in Southern Africa and elsewhere have associated high rates of HIV with poverty and, especially in Southern Africa, with women's lack of autonomy, Susser wonders whether the San's legacy of a lack of "relative poverty" (Sahlins' original affluence) might have granted them any small amount of protection against its spread. She also speculates whether the San legacy of female political agency may have provided the San some added measure of resiliency against HIV compared to neighbouring groups. While Susser and Lee's results remain preliminary and suggestive at this point, they point to important factors to consider concerning spread of—and possible resistance to—AIDS amongst the San.

These papers are our tribute to Richard Lee. We honour him as a scholar, ethnographer, theorist, teacher, mentor, activist and friend. We hope Richard will take this volume in the spirit of the gift that we so cherish in Anthropology, that is, as only one moment in a chain of open-ended exchanges, of generalized reciprocity, that will endure, repeat, expand, and embrace new members over time. Like a trinket in the *hxaro*[6] network or a valuable in the *Kula* ring, we see this volume as an offering that will be productive of new and more "items" and relations. We look forward to many more decades of productive interaction with and inspiration from Richard. We can most assuredly count on the fact that Lee will continue his commitment to anthropology, to the peoples of the Kalahari and Southern Africa, to his students and colleagues, and to art, science and politics.

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Notes

1 Richard Katz and Patricia Draper also presented papers at the 2001 conference. Susser was a discussant at the conference and has provided a paper for this volume. Brodkin was unable to attend the conference but has contributed a paper.

2 San is a generic term deriving from the language family of Khoisan. Debate has raged and fashion has changed regarding the correct and/or appropriate appellation to bestow upon the former foraging peoples of the Kalahari (and Southern Africa). Bushmen, once dismissed as pejorative, is coming back into fashion. Lee worked with people who call themselves Ju/'hoansi and have been called !Kung in much of the anthropological literature (see also Gailey, this volume). Since some articles in this volume, especially those by Guenther and Sylvain, focus upon other San groups than the Ju/'hoansi, I will employ the generic term San.

3 The San's diet had been described (Thomas, 1959), but Lee painstakingly documented how varied and highly nutritious it was.

4 As Gailey notes (personal communication), Lee's depiction of the control women exercised over their own work arrangements and distribution of products was significant for feminist scholars producing a critique of male bias in anthropology, such attentive writings were valuable indeed (see, inter alia, Slocum, 1975).

5 This passage derives from Lee's well-known article "Eating Christmas in the Kalahari" first published in *Natural History* magazine. At one point Lee told me that this article was the magazine's most frequently reprinted article. Lee's capacity to make people come alive through his writing, to engage an audience, and to do so through the classic Jewish humour motif of self-deprecation is portrayed brilliantly in this wonderful narrative.

6 *Hxaro* is a system of generalized gift exchange practiced amongst the Ju/'hoansi (Wiessner, 1982).

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