

## Introduction: rethinking the canon

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The question now inevitably asks itself, whether the lives of great men only should be recorded. Virginia Woolf, 'The Art of Biography' (1939).<sup>1</sup>

Along the main wall of the hallway in the Social Anthropology Department at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, there is an exhibition of the department's intellectual forefathers. This fictitious lineage, which graduate students and professors pass daily, has been on display, unchanged, for two decades. The exhibition consists of a row of ancestors presented, in each case, in large glass-bound framed portrait form with a paragraph-length caption explaining their significance, with particular emphasis on their theoretical contribution to 'the British school'. Those on display are Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown, Winifred Hoernlé, Isaac Schapera, Max Gluckman, David Webster, David Lewis-Williams, David Hammond-Tooke and David Coplan.

The problem with this narrative is that the founding intellectuals and heads of this truly remarkable department were, without exception, women.

This silence regarding women's contributions to the history of anthropology is not specific to South Africa, although the dominance of women in establishing and then developing the field in South Africa does make the bias in this case particularly revealing. In the introduction to the landmark collection *Women Writing Culture*, the feminist anthropologist, Ruth Behar, points to the heightened awareness in American anthropology of the late 1980s and early 1990s of the power of a conservative male-dominated canon.

Anthropologists have belatedly begun to realize that we, too, have a canon [like literary scholars], a set of 'great books' that we continue to teach to our students, as dutifully as they were taught to us in graduate school. That these books just

<sup>1</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Collected Essays, Vol. 4*, ed., Leonard Woolf (London: Chatto and Windus), 1967, 222. Thanks to Deborah James for editorial advice on this chapter.

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happen to be the writings of white men is an idea that can never be brought up. It seems somehow impolite.<sup>2</sup>

The questioning of this gendered and racially exclusive canon in American anthropology began, in her analysis, with the outrage of feminist anthropologists following the publication of the 1986 volume *Writing Culture*. While this initiated a self-reflexive turn in the discipline, and a greater appreciation of the complexity of cultural knowledge production, the collection featured just one female scholar, and its editor, James Clifford, explicitly defended the male canon by suggesting that feminist anthropologists were not experimental writers. In the fallout and then ferment that led to their alternative feminist history of the discipline, Behar was led to ask:

Why is the culture concept in anthropology only found through Sir Edward Tylor, Franz Boas, Bronislaw Malinowski, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Clifford Geertz? Could the writing of culture not be traced, as the essays in this volume suggest, through Elsie Clews Parsons, Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead, Ella Doloria, Zora Neale Hurston, Ruth Landes and Barbara Meyerhoff to Alice Walker?<sup>3</sup>

Let us return to the photo gallery of founding fathers that graces the hall at Wits. The first head of department, Winifred Hoernlé (1885–1960), does feature. The story of her role in establishing the discipline of social anthropology in South African universities between 1923 and 1937 will be at the heart of this study. She was, however, not preceded by Radcliffe-Brown. He had worked for a brief time as temporary lecturer in the psychology department at the Transvaal School of Mines before founding the social anthropology department at the University of Cape Town in 1921. Her successor as head of department was not Isaac Schapera, whose place on the wall relates to a single semester he spent as Hoernlé's stand-in when she travelled to London to visit Malinowski, but Audrey Isabel Richards (1899–1984), then a far more senior figure in the British school of social anthropology. Richards spent three highly productive, and hitherto almost entirely unacknowledged, years at Wits between 1938 and 1940. She consolidated Hoernlé's legacy in teaching excellence, departmental resource development and, above all, active promotion of a new generation of young researchers, almost all of whom were women. We should note in passing that the eldest of this cohort, Eileen Jensen Krige (1904–95), would have as much right as Schapera to a spot on the

<sup>2</sup> Ruth Behar, 'Introduction' in Ruth Behar and Deborah A. Gordon, eds., *Women Writing Culture* (Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1995), 11.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

wall, given that she too served as a substitute lecturer for Winifred Hoernlé for a semester, this time in 1936.

Audrey Richards was not succeeded by Max Gluckman. He did apply for a post in the Wits Bantu Studies Department but was rejected, partly at Richards' prompting.<sup>4</sup> Instead, Richards ensured that the university put aside its misgivings about appointing Jews and ensured that Hilda Beemer Kuper (1911–92) served as her successor, as she would do from 1941 to 1946. If one were to consider research contribution then Ellen Hellmann (1908–82) would surely also deserve a place on the wall. She published two monographs that pioneered the field of urban anthropology and was the first woman in the university to be awarded a doctoral degree, for the second of these studies completed in 1939. If contribution as a public intellectual were the yardstick, then Beemer Kuper's undergraduate and graduate student, the radical journalist and anti-apartheid activist Ruth First, would have a case for consideration. If the criterion remained narrowed down to leadership and senior teaching, Monica Hunter Wilson (1908–82) would have been the *fifth* successive woman head of department (after Hoernlé, Krige, Richards and Kuper) had the University Appointments Committee not turned down her application in 1946 in favour of a transparently weaker male candidate, Mervyn Jeffreys.<sup>5</sup>

We should note that women scholars would continue to play a leading role in the Wits department in subsequent decades from a second generation of urban anthropologists, Laura Longmore and Mia Brandel-Syrier researching and publishing in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, to talented ethnographers and ethnographically oriented historians who began their long careers in the 1980s and 1990s, most notably Deborah James and Carolyn Hamilton. But it is the six founding foremothers associated with this department, and indeed social anthropology in South Africa – Winifred Hoernlé, her one-time informal student Monica Hunter Wilson, her successor Audrey Richards, and her three most dedicated disciples, Ellen Hellmann, Hilda Beemer Kuper and Eileen Jensen Krige – who are the central protagonists in this revised narrative about the discipline's history.

Before giving an overview of how, in more detail, I propose to reconstruct their hidden contributions, I would highlight that the Wits

<sup>4</sup> University of Cape Town Libraries, Manuscripts and Archives Department, BC880 Monica and Godfrey Wilson Papers [Wilson Collection, WC], Correspondence, B4.7 [GW] To and from Audrey Richards, MSS & TSS, Audrey Richards to Godfrey Wilson, 2 February 1939.

<sup>5</sup> WC, Correspondence B6.14, [MW] To and from Audrey Richards, Audrey Richards to Monica Wilson, 25 June 1946.

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exhibition is a fair and accurate reflection of how social anthropologists in South Africa have told, and continue to tell, the story of their past. In this regard it is instructive that the standard overview history of the discipline by David Hammond-Tooke, published by Wits University Press in 1997 and reissued in 2001, devotes no more than one page in ten to the work of women scholars. He devotes more attention to the alleged contributions to South African social anthropology of two pro-segregation, German-trained linguists-turned-‘tribal’ ethnographers, the Afrikaner nationalist and later architect of apartheid, Willi Werner Eiselen, and the official Native Affairs Department anthropologist, Nicolas van Warmelo, than to the full collective of women scholars cited above, whose writings, as the chapters that follow will indicate, are consistently undervalued, marginalized and sometimes misread in Hammond-Tooke’s study.<sup>6</sup>

There are dozens of journal articles or book chapters on the work of ‘The Founding Fathers’. Scholarly writings on South African women anthropologists, by contrast, have been few and far between. There has been surprisingly little curiosity regarding the lives, works and intellectual legacy of the women pioneers who form the core cast of this study. The recent upsurge of interest in Monica Hunter Wilson, beginning with a centenary conference held in July 2008 and culminating in two book-length biographies, makes her a notable exception.<sup>7</sup> Apart from their respective obituaries and relatively brief appreciative retrospective essays written two or three decades ago, women anthropologists have received short shrift. Indeed, in those rare instances where they have been the subject of any attention by the current generation of social anthropologists, as in Kelly Gillespie’s essay on Winifred Hoernlé’s work in the field of social welfare in the 1940s, the argument has been a rehearsal of the somewhat well-worn case for the ambiguities and limitations of the racial ideology of South African liberalism.<sup>8</sup> Even in the case of Audrey Richards, who has had the benefit of gifted and eloquent students and

<sup>6</sup> On Eiselen and Van Warmelo, see W. David Hammond-Tooke, *Imperfect Interpreters: South Africa’s Anthropologists, 1920–1990* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1997), 57–69, 108–18. On the six women anthropologists cited above, see 35–8, 77–90, 143–4.

<sup>7</sup> See Andrew Bank and Leslie J. Bank, eds., *Inside African Anthropology: Monica Wilson and Her Interpreters* (New York: Cambridge University Press in association with the International African Institute, 2013); Seán Morrow, *The Fires Beneath: The Life of Monica Wilson, South African Anthropologist* (Johannesburg: Penguin South Africa, 2016).

<sup>8</sup> Kelly Gillespie, ‘Containing the “Wandering Native”’: Racial Jurisdiction and the Liberal Politics of Prison Reform in 1940s South Africa’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 37, 3 (2011), 499–515. For the original Marxist critique, see Paul B. Rich, *White Power and the Liberal Conscience: Racial Segregation and South African Liberalism, 1921–1960* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1984).

friends to showcase her work and charisma, the lack of a book-length biography to rival those of her male mentors and peers remains a striking silence.<sup>9</sup>

Why, we might ask following Ruth Behar, is the concept of culture traced only through a male lineage? Could the writing of culture in southern Africa not be tracked instead through a female line, from Winifred Hoernlé and Audrey Richards through Hunter and Hellmann, Kuper and Krige, to new generations of women ethnographers including those mentioned earlier? Following this lineage one could make a powerful case for these foremothers having invented a, or *the*, ‘great tradition’ during what has rightly been seen as ‘a golden age’ of creative fieldwork and internationally acclaimed ethnographic production by South African anthropologists. These women ethnographers led the way in documenting and analysing the then still much-derided cultures of African peoples in the kind of meticulous detail that subsequent generations of ethnographers have seldom been able to replicate, for reasons I will explore in concluding this study.

A graduate course on women writing southern African culture would have to begin with the three essays written in the early to mid-1920s by Winifred Hoernlé, the ‘mother of South African anthropology’, as her devoted students warmly acknowledged. Here students would explore her first fieldwork-based case studies for understanding African social systems, beginning with the Nama communities of the southern African interior, in relation to their histories, as well as their interrelated cultural ‘elements’, with the concept of ritual rites of passage centre-stage. The course would continue by examining how a path-breaking cultural theory of biological needs was developed by Audrey Richards in her 1930 study *Hunger and Work* and then ethnographically applied at field-sites in southern Africa by all of the women scholars mentioned earlier, but most fully of course by Richards herself in the case of Bemba society in *Land, Labour and Diet* (1939). One would proceed by highlighting the sustained attention to sexuality and gender in the work of each of these women who, unlike their male counterparts who wrote about sexuality (like Schapera), gathered their field data, in the main, from women informants. This allowed them, inter alia, to foreground the political power of women in southern African societies, from the Swazi Queen

<sup>9</sup> In 1978 Adam Kuper asked Audrey whether he could write her biography. She rejected his ‘startling suggestion’, enquiring: ‘Have you special associations with Routledge [publishers of his controversial 1973 history of the British school] that enable you to do this?’ She never did ‘get first shot’ at writing her life history as she was too busy completing her Elmdon village histories. Audrey Richards to Adam Kuper, 13 June 1978, London, Private Papers of Adam Kuper.

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Mother and Lovedu Rain-Queen down to the Bemba matriarch and Pondo mother-in-law. Their women-centred fieldwork allowed them to provide richer and more textured accounts than those of their male counterparts of the agricultural work, family relations and ritual lives of southern African women.<sup>10</sup>

One could then track these three central themes in the understanding of traditional cultural systems in the region, those of ritual, nutrition and gender relations, through to the more mature writings of these women scholars. Here students would read Kuper on the *Incwala* rituals associated with Swazi kingship (1947) and later on the rituals associated with Hindu worship in Durban (1960), by Hunter Wilson on the communal and family rituals of the Nyakyusa (1957, 1959), by Richards (if we may extend our interest in her beyond her time at Wits) on the Chisungu puberty ceremonies (1956), and articles by Krige on Zulu women's songs (1968) and Lovedu 'woman-marriage' (1975). In all these cases there was a new emphasis on ritual symbolism, creatively interpreted in ways that prefigured the work of the male scholars, notably Victor Turner, who is conventionally credited with having initiated African anthropology's 'symbolic turn'.<sup>11</sup>

Surely the most distinctive feature of their body of work, however, the latter section of the course would reveal, was their opening up of the study of cultural change in southern Africa. This involved entering new kinds of ethnographic field-sites beyond the 'native reserves' studied by their male counterparts like Schapera and Gluckman. Whether or not one chose to track the roots of urban fieldwork in the region right back to Hoernlé's two months in Windhoek in 1922–3, as I later propose, all would surely agree that they collectively pioneered urban anthropology during the early to mid-1930s. Whether emphasizing the straining of traditional cultures in urban settings, as all of them did, or the resilience of a female-dominated working class subculture, as Hellmann did so richly in 'Rooiyard' (1935), theirs were the first ethnographies of Africans in South African cities: in East London and Grahamstown (Hunter), Pretoria (Krige) and Johannesburg (Kuper and especially Hellmann in two full monographs). One might also reflect more deeply than is usually the case on how one of them (Hunter) opened up the anthropological study of white farms, a field South African women scholars have taken

<sup>10</sup> On Audrey Richards' achievement in this regard, see Henrietta L. Moore and Megan Vaughan, *Cutting Down Trees: Gender, Nutrition, and Agricultural Change in the Northern Province of Zambia, 1890–1990* (Portsmouth, New Haven: Heinemann, 1994).

<sup>11</sup> Victor W. Turner, significantly, devoted his famous *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembo Ritual* (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 1967) to Monica Wilson who had influenced him during time at the University of Cape Town in 1954–5.

forward in recent years,<sup>12</sup> as part of a multi-sited ethnographic method that anticipated the work of the next generation.<sup>13</sup> Another (Kuper) produced the first historical ethnography of Indian communities in South Africa, in this case in Durban of the 1950s.

One would also need to feature a seminar on the late historical turn in the careers of Hunter Wilson and Beemer Kuper, whose writings had always been historically sensitive in their attention to African oral tradition. They now also drew extensively on documentary sources, especially in the *Oxford History of South Africa*, in which Wilson rather than Leonard Thompson played the dominant role as planner, co-editor and most prominent author,<sup>14</sup> and in their biographies of the African leaders Sobhuza II (1978) and ZK Matthews (1981).

Given the literary turn in the discipline, one would surely also need to feature a seminar on the narrative gifts of all these women. Here one would examine their skill as ethnographers, an aspect of their craft that has received less attention than it should. A study of carefully crafted narrative could usefully be explored in relation to their dozen excellent monographs: in chronological order of completion, *Hunger and Work* (1930), 'Rooiyard' (1935), *Reaction to Conquest* (1936), *Land, Labour and Diet* (1939), *The Realm of a Rain-Queen* (with Jack Krige, 1943), *The Analysis of Social Change* (with the late Godfrey Wilson, 1945), *An African Aristocracy* (1947), *The Uniform of Colour* (1947), *Good Company* (1951), *Chisungu* (1956), *Communal Rituals of the Nyakyusa* (1957), *Kinship Rituals of the Nyakyusa* (1959) and *Indians in South Africa* (1960) with a case to be made for *Langa: A Study in Social Groups* (with Archie Mafeje).<sup>15</sup> One would certainly need to explore the precocious ethnographic experimentation with new forms of creative writing by Hilda Kuper, whose female- and African-centred short stories, plays and novel anticipated by some decades the literary turn in social anthropology world-wide, let alone in the region.

Why has the story of these women's contributions to 'theory', as well as fieldwork innovation and ethnography, not been fully appreciated?

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Susan Levine, *Children of a Bitter Harvest: Child Labour in the Cape Winelands* (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2013).

<sup>13</sup> Jean Comaroff, 'Monica Wilson and the Practice of "Deep Ethnography": Roundtable on South African Women Anthropologists and Ethnography' (unpublished paper presented at the Anthropology Southern Africa Conference, University of the Western Cape, September 2008).

<sup>14</sup> Seán Morrow and Christopher Saunders, "'Part of One Whole": Anthropology and History in the Work of Monica Wilson' in Bank and Bank, eds., *Inside African Anthropology*, 291–8.

<sup>15</sup> See Andrew Bank with Vuyiswa Swana, "'Speaking from Inside": Archie Mafeje, Monica Wilson and the Co-Production of *Langa: A Study of Social Groups in an African Township*' in Bank and Bank, eds., *Inside African Anthropology*, 253–79.

The answer is partly because historians of anthropology have highlighted the achievements of male rather than female ancestors. There is, however, more to it than the privileging of male at the expense of female mentors. It relates to how the narrative of the origins and development of South African anthropology, a tradition on the periphery, has been subordinated to a narrative about the metropolitan tradition, the wider story about the origins and development of the British tradition of social anthropology. And here of course Adam Kuper has played the central role as the author of the foundational text, currently running into its fourth edition. The fact that Radcliffe-Brown, Schapera and Gluckman all became significant figures in anthropology in Britain, at Oxford, London and Manchester, respectively, and founders of schools, those of structural-functionalism and the Manchester School in particular, accounts for the prominence given to their contributions to South African anthropology at the expense of women scholars. The latter, with the partial exception of Hilda Kuper who emigrated in 1961 (and of course Richards who returned to England in 1940), stayed in South Africa and courageously sought to develop the discipline from within under increasingly oppressive intellectual and political circumstances.

A comparison with the way in which American sociology came to construct the canon in its own image is instructive. Adopting a definition of a 'canon' as 'a privileged set of texts, whose interpretation and reinterpretation defines a field', Raewyn Connell demonstrates how a narrowed-down cast of Founding Fathers, here the unholy trinity of Durkheim, Weber and Marx, and a stripped bare core theory, that of dealing with disorder and deviance in the making of the modern Western state, came to displace what had been a much more complex intellectual tradition in the decades before the First World War. The earlier, richer, turn-of-the-century tradition had been more internationally collaborative, here between Europe and the United States, and more diverse and eclectic in scope.

Connell too readily dismisses the value of challenging these male-dominated metropolitan narratives of disciplinary origins and development on the grounds that it 'does nothing to change the terms of intellectual production in the present'.<sup>16</sup> Her pessimism derives perhaps from the difficulties of rethinking the discipline of sociology in a more open and inclusive way. While Harriet Martineau is among the only candidates to have been proposed as a 'foremother' of sociology, the situation is different for social and cultural anthropology, where women

<sup>16</sup> Raewyn Connell, *Southern Theory: The Global Dynamics of Knowledge in Science* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), xi.



did play a much more active role from the outset. This was in part due to the newness of the discipline as well as the greater difficulties in policing fieldwork as compared with laboratory or library knowledge. The enhanced presence of women in allied field sciences, like botany, suggests that the spatial dispersion of the anthropological method, at least as practised from the 1910s and 1920s in the mainstream British and American traditions and beyond, allowed for the enhanced participation of women. From the very outset, even the relatively conservative evolutionary anthropologists like the Oxford professor Edward B. Tylor, who occupied the first chair in anthropology in Britain from 1888, explicitly promoted the idea that women could play an important role as researchers given their enhanced access to the women's sphere in 'primitive cultures'.<sup>17</sup> This idea continued to have currency through the interwar years and beyond. As many scholars have noted, these two mainstream traditions enjoyed the benefits of two gatekeepers from the 'outside', the German Jew Franz Boas and the Polish aristocrat Bronislaw Malinowski. They were both unusually welcoming to students from the margins, whether ethnic minorities, colonials or women, and trained and promoted the leading women scholars of the pioneering generation, notably Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict in cultural anthropology and Audrey Richards in social anthropology. Indeed, Mead (1901–78) became the face of the discipline in twentieth-century America, publishing more than 1300 books, biographical articles and reviews in the second and third quarters of the century and becoming 'an American icon', highly adept at garnering radio and television in service of both self-promotion and that of the discipline, as Nancy Lutkehaus so vividly demonstrates.<sup>18</sup>

It was, after all, Mead who coined the concept of anthropology as 'The Welcoming Science'. In an essay written in 1960, she reflected that 'Anthropology, a new science, welcomed the stranger ... [A]nthropology was kinder to women, those who came from distant disciplines, to members of minority groups in general ... to the "over-mature", the idiosyncratic, and the capriciously gifted or experienced, to refugees ...'.<sup>19</sup> It is certainly true that women entered anthropology from an early stage in all traditions, metropolitan and marginal. Again the trend was particularly pronounced in American anthropology

<sup>17</sup> Lyn Schumaker, 'Women in the Field in the Twentieth Century: Revolution, Involution, Devolution?' in Henrika Kuklick, ed., *A New History of Anthropology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2008), 280.

<sup>18</sup> Nancy C. Lutkehaus, *Margaret Mead: The Making of an America Icon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

<sup>19</sup> Nancy Parezo, 'Anthropology: The Welcoming Science' in Parezo, ed., *Hidden Scholars: Women Anthropologists and the Native American Southwest* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993), 3.

where feminist theory and the long-established history of women in institutions of higher learning opened the flood-gates for women field-workers and researchers, especially from the period of ‘the explosion of anthropology in the 1960s’.<sup>20</sup>

Louise Lamphere revisited this question in her seminal centenary address to the American Anthropological Association meeting of 2001, later published as ‘Unofficial Histories: A Vision of Anthropology from the Margins’. She goes on to identify important areas in which women and minorities have made an unacknowledged impact on American anthropology, three of which have direct application to the pioneering generation of South African women scholars whose work is showcased in this study. First, these ‘scholars on the margins’ contributed to ‘the transformation of field research through problem-oriented participant observation’ as exemplified in the early fieldwork of Margaret Mead. Second, they developed more diverse and ‘dialogical forms of ethnographic writing’. Third, they typically had a much more strongly ‘applied’, engaged or socially committed orientation than their male counterparts. She highlights the combination of anthropology and activism, as exemplified by Anita McGee and Alfonzo Ortiz as well as Mead and Benedict.<sup>21</sup>

If women’s contributions to American cultural anthropology have been dumbed down, this is all the more so in the case of the British social anthropological tradition out of which South African social anthropology emerged from the 1920s. There are many ways of illustrating this, but perhaps the strongest index is how women in the British anthropological tradition feature in biographies or biographical dictionaries. For a current example we might take the fascinatingly diverse Routledge collection on *Fifty Key Anthropologists* published in 2011. The three co-editors, based in North America and Canada, indicate that they canvassed widely and found a large measure of consensus about the core figures in the history of the discipline, which would have included those mentioned above as male founding fathers by Behar and Gordon, but that there was more dispute about the remaining places. In the end, though, only ten of their top fifty are deemed to have been women and fully half of their cast comprises American cultural anthropologists. There are a further eleven British social anthropologists and six French scholars. While representative voices from other parts of the empire are lacking, South African anthropology features rather generously with six representatives. Yet all

<sup>20</sup> Nancy Parezo, ‘Preface’ in Parezo, ed., *Hidden Scholars*, xii.

<sup>21</sup> Louise Lamphere, ‘Unofficial Histories: A Vision of Anthropology from the Margins’, *American Anthropologist*, 106, 1 (2004), 126–39.