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IN MEMORIAM

Introduction: In Memoriam, James Ferguson

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I began my PhD in anthropology as a neophyte to the discipline. I picked up quickly that the ways of speaking common in the international conflict research realm I had just left behind ("failed states") were seen as ahistorical and demonizing. Eager to shed what now appeared to me as naïveté, I resolved to read and listen. I joined an Africanist anthropology reading group, and the first book we discussed was James Ferguson's *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order* (2006), which had just been published. In it, Ferguson argues that anthropologists should participate in discussions about the fate of Africa, even if it means sometimes sacrificing nuance or theoretical sophistication. The reading group's resident skeptic said there was little new in the book. The group's resident critic noted what was "problematic." But for me, unsure of what anthropology even was at that point, the book welcomed me into the field. It offered permission to debate how scholars should think about relativism and difference in the context of Africa.

Ferguson was not the first to argue for anthropologists to rejoin messy public and academic debate about Africa in the world. (One literarily memorable precursor was Mary Douglas, in a lecture describing a stay at a once-grand, now-rundown hotel in the Congo, the Hotel Kwilu [1989].) But Ferguson was like a chef who, while using many of the same ingredients as others, puts them together in a way that is simultaneously simpler and tastier, and that therefore is always the first that comes to mind. The introduction to *Global Shadows* is often among the first texts I assign my classes on the anthropology of African politics. It lays out clear arguments that provide a reference point for our discussions over the rest of the semester.

This was a feat he repeated throughout his career. He published a book a little more than once a decade, and each crystallized the anthropological Zeitgeist. Each book took topics that were circulating in the field at that moment, turned them around, and put them back together in such a way that people both saw the whole and its pieces as they never had before, and in a way they would not forget. His first book, *The Anti-Politics Machine* (1990) was not, for instance, the only book to use a Foucaultian lens to understand the workings of international development projects. But it is the only one that I have heard rhapsodized about by everyone from a historian colleague (he asks his global affairs master's students

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to recreate its second chapter, which analyzes a World Bank report about Lesotho, by dissecting reports central to their own work); to a graduate student—in class just last week—recommending it to a fellow student who had not quite figured out how to put together the pieces of her questions about Japanese development aid; to a former biology student in Beijing who credits it with turning him toward anthropology and Africa.

How many people have read a line in Ferguson's work, been deeply inspired, and taken it up in their own ways?[1] That question inspires this *In Memoriam* collection. The authors of these essays knew Jim at different phases of his career —and different phases of theirs—and have had different relationships to his work. Some were colleagues and long-term friends, while others—such as myself —did not know him personally. We hope to give readers a sense of the breadth of his influence in the anthropology of Africa and beyond, in the past and into the future.

"The fact is we do not know where all of this is headed," wrote Ferguson in the conclusion to what became his last book, *Give a Man a Fish: Reflections on the New Politics of Distribution* (2015). His "this" referred to the distributive politics he spied in southern Africa. But his sentiment seems fitting in the context of his untimely passing, too. His work has given us methods and questions. Now it is up to us to carry on his distinctive mode of anthropological curiosity, and to make it our own, while remembering that, as he continued the above quote, "this is a time of possibilities, not certainties; a time for experiments, not conclusions" (207).

Author Biography. **Louisa Lombard** is an associate professor of anthropology at Yale University. She is the author of *State of Rebellion: Violence and Intervention in the Central African Republic*, and *Hunting Game: Raiding Politics in the Central African Republic*, and she is finishing a book manuscript about the transformations of military peacekeeping in Africa.

Note

1. To note that his work inspires widely is not, however, to say that everyone agrees with him. His book *Give a Man a Fish* (2015) makes a provocative argument that in places like southern Africa, where the number of jobs continues to shrink, distributive labor (a broad range of activities from theft to motherly care) should be valued alongside productive labor (more stereotypical jobs). As historian Benedetta Rossi wrote in her review of the book, "The risk is that exalting the positive values of 'distribution' conceals realities where people simply have no alternatives to begging, stealing, having sex with 'sugar daddies', or depending upon more fortunate relatives or patrons. Relabelling those activities 'distributive labor' is a rhetorical device that makes them sound more acceptable. But are the subjects of Ferguson's research happy to beg to live just because such activity can be reimagined as 'pressing a distributive claim' (p. 101)?" (Rossi 2016, 574–75).

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