How to set up for eternity

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David Graeber’s least known and lengthiest book Lost People: Magic and The Legacy of Slavery in Madagascar (2007a) was his dissertation.

Recently I’ve come to realize that he had been writing and rewriting this book all his life.

People say that children’s personalities are formed by age five and that mathematicians make their most significant discoveries when they are young. I, too, believe that most of us come across the key questions of our lives in our youth and that the luckiest of us find opportunities as adults to pursue their answers.

For David, it all began in Madagascar. As a graduate student, he lived there for two years, collecting field notes, learning Malagasy, having a girlfriend, and uncovering the remarkable story of a people descended from a blend of European pirates and Malagasy women – the Zala Mata. These pirates, though also white colonizers, diverged from the destructive, often genocidal path taken by practically every other group of white settlers; instead, their descendants forged a new culture that endures to this day. According to David, this culture made a significant, though tragically underrecognized, contribution to what we now proudly refer to as the “European Enlightenment.”

David always referred to Lost People as his best book.

While conducting his doctoral research in Madagascar, he took many photographs. He drew a lot of maps, ranging in size from very small sketches with captions to huge maps over a meter long. He left behind hours of recorded interviews with Malagasy people, as well as a collection of textiles, toys, and clothing. Combined, all of this can safely be described as an artistic project of understanding made by a surprisingly attentive and caring observer.

With incredible empathy, David immersed himself in a new context altogether different than what he knew growing up. He was an American boy from a working-class immigrant family who arrived in a French-controlled land without speaking French. The only language in which David could communicate with the locals was his newly acquired Malagasy. Perhaps the fact that he was not a native speaker of the colonial language helped him to win favor with the villagers. But we know from his notes that learning their
language first helped him to perceive the situation on the island not from the perspective of the colonist (as from above) but on an equal footing with the natives.

Part of the Madagascar collection comprises photographs taken by David. A testament to the time he was there, these photographs were printed on film, not digitally recorded. This makes them look like objects, more similar to paintings than what we now understand photographs to be – ethereal and omnipresent.

David’s Malagasy photographs remind me of eighteenth-century drawings, slightly faded, with a subtle combination of colors, and the author’s gaze is incredibly calm and compassionate. He captures ordinariness rather than exoticism, humanity rather than otherness.

We see that these are real people – just like us.

I dream of printing these photographs on large-format canvas so that the richness and transcendence of the colors, the mystery of the faces of his heroes, will flesh out.

David Graeber traveled to Madagascar from what we are told are the epicenters of Western Democracy. But once there, on this island far from home he discovered to his astonishment a people who were governing themselves via direct democracy.

As David describes in one of his interviews:

In this respect, the Malagasy people are totally engaging in direct action. They’re the ultimate direct actionists, but they’re also in a situation where it’s much easier to get away with it. Well, if we are talking about the rural areas, off the paved roads, no one was collecting taxes and the police would not come. So, the two most essential functions, extracting revenues and enforcing the law, the state just did not do. Even in the smaller towns they barely did. The Malagasy have created this “almost revolution” by subtle indirection. It’s like a magic trick. I realized that, essentially the government had ceased to exist, and the people had come up with ingenious expedients of how to deal with the fact that there was still technically a government, it was just really far away. Part of the idea was never to put the authorities in a situation where they lost face, or where they had to prove that they were in charge. They were incredibly nice to them if they didn’t try to exercise power, and made things as difficult as possible if they did. The course of least resistance was to go along with the charade. (Evans; Moses, 2011).

David had always sought out and found kinship with those on the margins of society because that’s where he came from. Having grown up working class, his academic career as an anthropologist brought him to the periphery of Ivy League academia, a place he never felt was truly his home. As a young professor at Yale, he was more likely to make friendships with other activists, artists, scholars, and outsiders who, like him, were navigating the margins of elite academia than he was with other professors. Rarely did he find himself hanging out with those he called the “power brokers.” To the extent that David was open to engaging in long conversations with unknown journalists or students
(that’s how he and I met in New York in 2006), he was also notoriously condescending toward careerists, authority figures, or virtually anyone whom he perceived to be using their power to manipulate others, which rules out a lot of people in the modern neoliberal university.

So, given his distaste for it and his wholesale lack of support within the establishment, his own success was unexpected, and he spoke of his fame with a degree of irony and incredulity. His dismissal from Yale never left him. Though he had eventually found a new position in London at Goldsmiths, he was always thereafter afraid of losing his job.

After his death, as is often the case, his popularity skyrocketed. Many people began reading his books and watching endless videos of his speeches scattered all over the internet.

It is all the more important to ask what kind of immortality David would have agreed to and what kind of eternity would not have suited him at all.

When as a student, David went to Madagascar, he took only two books with him: *Brothers Karamazov* by Fiodor Dostoevsky and *Rabelais and His World* by Mikhail Bakhtin. These books emphasized ideas much closer to those of Madagascans than to those of Western culture today. They asserted the primacy of dialogue over monologue, cooperation over competition, carnivalesque mockery and the complexity of human existence over hierarchy. According to the literary scholar and philosopher Bakhtin, Dostoevsky created a radically innovative literary form: the polyphonic novel. Its essential features were ultimate objectivity in recreating the points of view of the characters, the diversity of their voices, and the dialogical discord between them. In Dostoevsky’s novel, there was no single author-god-narrator from whose point of view the world was described.

This is a very anthropological position, one that David developed in his study in Madagascar. It also shaped his attitude toward all literary work. David understood it as a dialogue and cooperation rather than an individual achievement of himself or any other author. From these very different contexts and circumstances, David was able to synthesize his larger intellectual project, which he outlined in an essay called “There Never Was a West. Or Democracy Emerges from the Spaces In Between” (2007b)

Two more books were later published, detailing the very different modes of social organization that existed before and outside of colonial European hegemony: *Pirate Enlightenment*, or the Real Libertalia (2023) originally published in a collection of essays, together with Marshall Sahlins’s *On Kings* (2017), and *Dawn of Everything. A New History of Humanity* (2021) with the archaeologist David Wengrow.

Before his death, David planned a long-term literary and philosophical project with Mehdi Belhadj Kasem but only managed to publish one book with him, *Anarchy - In a Manner of Speaking. Conversations with Mehdi Belhaj Kacem, Nika Dubrovsky, and Assia Turquier-Zauberman* (2020a). He generously included me and Assia Turquier-Zauberman in this dialogue.

David worked with Brian Eno, Christophe Petit, David Wengrow, Andrei Grubasik, and planned many other collaborations with various people. David and I have
been working on a series of children’s books called Anthropology for Kids, some of which have been completed, and some have only outlines and notes left. We wrote together a collection of essays, Another Art World (2019), and a whole series of essays on movies.

The significance of the idea of collectivity in his literary work cannot be overemphasized. David considered himself a revolutionary scholar because he not only explored the present and past but believed that this insight could be used to build a better and just society. In a very Marxian sense, it was not enough for him to merely interpret the world; his point was to change it. And integral to his theory of change was recognizing that the institutions and structures that we have today were made by us and as such could just as easily be made differently. That’s primarily what his life’s work consisted of. David insisted that “anarchism is not as an identity but as something you do” (as he wrote about himself on his Twitter account). One could easily describe David’s main intellectual project as democratizing the very process of meaning-making itself.

In the unpublished manuscript Monastic Itself, David quotes what he describes as a provocative text by Maurice Bloch, Going in and Out of Each Other’s Bodies (2013). It refers to the central interest of the anthropology discipline, its curiosity about questions that only it can answer. Questions like: what are humans? In what ways are we the same? In what ways are we different? He describes the essential techniques of the collective production of meaning and dialogue as the basis of human consciousness:

For anthropology to be able to offer any explanation of its own existence – to be able to ask (to adopt a phrase from Roy Bhaskar), both “what makes anthropology possible” – why do we even have the capacity to understand someone living in rural Madagascar, but also, simultaneously, “what makes anthropology necessary,” why that understanding is usually not transparent, and in so many respects, extraordinarily difficult. (taken from Monastic Itself)

It seems to me that an awareness that humans are a collective creation, a reflection on how this collectivity is structured, has gone hand in hand with the decolonization of anthropology and the democratization of literary work.

Together, we once wrote a children’s book called What Are Kings? Edifying and truthful stories (2020b) “The King is dead—Long live the King” was a phrase that epitomized the immortality of the king’s body.

Knowing David, I don’t think he would have agreed to this kind of royal immortality where a “new David” would be appointed in his place by some authority (academic or otherwise), “to carry on” his tradition. Would he want bronze monuments in his honor to appear in the world's leading universities?

It seems unlikely that he would have been happy with bronze statues or an appointed acolyte. Still, he would surely have been grateful for the fun and companionship of a collectivity working toward his shared vision of freedom.
Perhaps the existing educational and publishing structures are not the best place to realize the collectivity that David dreamed of, but all the more true is his observation that we ourselves have created these structures and may as well build other ones.
Como se preparar para a eternidade...
Como se preparar para a eternidade...
Como se preparar para a eternidade...

Fotografia 3
Fotografia 4
Well today wasn’t a perfect day like yesterday, but it wasn’t by all a bad one.

The plan had been to go to visit someone called Aunauvo, grandson of the old man who was Ask at the Barakat at the home/Resident talola. (He who still does). We did not the history of Aunauvo.

Then continue on the same road to Mananabine, which we had been told all sorts of interesting things about.

Will Aunauvo wasn’t in neither was his wife. We’ll come back. And so we went on, this the droungi and rather pleasant wind. (A cycle had hit the bus on the road, but to the N… it directed sporadically throughout the day but never really rained). We were my brother, yellow shirt that I’ve discovered is exactly like a Treasure – the kind that I say, which is my buttons down to almost the belt but hanging down fillier to fillier.

Fotografia 5

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Voices one might hear:

It'll be fun to be actually on my way, tomorrow.
I'd be nice to check the fan heater + practice
of the noise.

Oh, another thing I've been looking at:

6 SPEECH GENRES:

I went w Jacques over all the
compounds from the word "mukvi" (sac-baby,
res-a-baby...) which relate to forms of mostly
idle conversation. I'd like to end up w a good
list of all the classified speech genres (i.e.,
what they're names for) from trusary to the
stuff you do when hanging out, killing time...
To help out w my general work on stories +
conversation. Should be fun as well as useful.
My still-scarcy field notes are beginning to fill
out.

TUE 27 FEB '89

I should use this brief interlude to supplies
$ to buy useful things: not only books in
Malagasy but also a new dictionary, pens, more

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Fotografia 7
Referências bibliográficas


GRAEBER, David; DUBROVSKY, Nika. 2020b. What are Kings? Edifying and truthful stories. eb00k LLC


GRAEBER, David. Monastic Itself Inédito.


sobre a autora

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