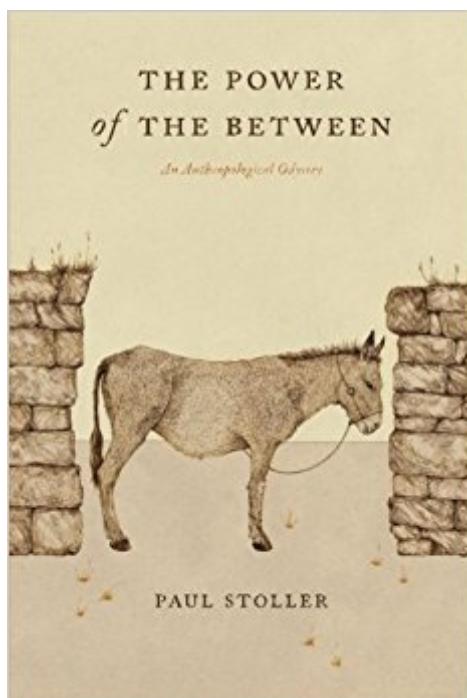


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# The Power Of The Between: An Anthropological Odyssey



## Synopsis

It is the anthropologist's fate to always be between things: countries, languages, cultures, even realities. But rather than lament this, anthropologist Paul Stoller here celebrates the creative power of the between, showing how it can transform us, changing our conceptions of who we are, what we know, and how we live in the world. Beginning with his early days with the Peace Corps in Africa and culminating with a recent bout with cancer, *The Power of the Between* is an evocative account of the circuitous path Stoller's life has taken, offering a fascinating depiction of how a career is shaped over decades of reading and research. Stoller imparts his accumulated wisdom not through grandiose pronouncements but by drawing on his gift for storytelling. Tales of his apprenticeship to a sorcerer in Niger, his studies with Claude Lévi-Strauss in Paris, and his friendships with West African street vendors in New York City accompany philosophical reflections on love, memory, power, courage, health, and illness. Graced with Stoller's trademark humor and narrative elegance, *The Power of the Between* is both the story of a distinguished career and a profound meditation on coming to terms with the impermanence of all things.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"The Power of the Between offers something truly original: a personal intellectual history that combines rigorous scholarship, engaging discussions of theory, and intimate portraits of an ethnographer in the field, at home and abroad. By stitching together the narrative of his career in anthropology with discussions of his own intellectual development along the way, Stoller

demonstrates how doing anthropology and living it are, or at least should be, one and the same."--Russell Leigh Sharman, author of *Nightshift NYC* "The Power of the Between" offers something truly original: a personal intellectual history that combines rigorous scholarship, engaging discussions of theory, and intimate portraits of an ethnographer in the field, at home and abroad. By stitching together the narrative of his career in anthropology with discussions of his own intellectual development along the way, Stoller demonstrates how doing anthropology and living it are, or at least should be, one and the same.--Russell Leigh Sharman, author of "Nightshift NYC" "Paul Stoller is an adventurer, following a sensuous path whose sudden turns connect rationality with relativism, rivers with sand dunes, ancient deities with postcolonial politicians, West African villages with the streets of Harlem, rural traders with urban art collectors, and the methods of the sorcerer with those of the chemotherapist. This is the story of a true ethnographer."--Dennis Tedlock, author of "Breath on the Mirror: Mythic Voices and Visions of the Living Maya" "Paul Stoller's signature style of crafting dramatic, often humorous stories to convey ethnographic insights and explore wider theoretical themes has taken him across many genres of writing, including the fieldwork memoir and fiction. With "The Power of the Between", Stoller brings us a powerful disciplinary memoir: vivid, eloquent, and laden with wisdom."--Kirin Narayan, author of "My Family and Other Saints" "Paul Stoller's signature style of crafting dramatic, often humorous stories to convey ethnographic insights and explore wider theoretical themes has taken him across many genres of writing, including the fieldwork memoir and fiction. With "The Power of the Between", Stoller brings us a powerful disciplinary memoir: vivid, eloquent, and laden with wisdom."--Kirin Narayan, author of *My Family and Other Saints* "The Power of the Between" offers something truly original: a personal intellectual history that combines rigorous scholarship, engaging discussions of theory, and intimate portraits of an ethnographer in the field, at home and abroad. By stitching together the narrative of his career in anthropology with discussions of his own intellectual development along the way, Stoller demonstrates how doing anthropology and living it are, or at least should be, one and the same."--Russell Leigh Sharman, author of *Nightshift NYC* "Paul Stoller is an adventurer, following a sensuous path whose sudden turns connect rationality with relativism, rivers with sand dunes, ancient deities with postcolonial politicians, West African villages with the streets of Harlem, rural traders with urban art collectors, and the methods of the sorcerer with those of the chemotherapist. This is the story of a true ethnographer."--Dennis Tedlock, author of "Breath on the Mirror: Mythic Voices and Visions of the Living Maya"

Paul Stoller is professor of anthropology at West Chester University and the author of ten books,

including Money Has No Smell, Jaguar, and In Sorcery's Shadow.

I am hesitant to criticize this book. The author, Paul Stoller, is a very likable person. He has a gift for storytelling, and writes in an easy-to-read, accessible style, while addressing complex issues that have been debated in the discipline for decades. His life story is quite unusual, and his accumulated experience clearly deserves sharing. He applies high ethical standards to his work, and is obviously concerned about the lives of peoples about whom he writes. He has a good sense of humor, and doesn't take himself too seriously. His tale is full of interesting details, unexpected twists and turns, and life lessons that convey a deep sensitivity to the human condition. He isn't the first anthropologist to offer a personal memoir mixing the intimate with the professional. Compared to Levi-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques* for instance, he is both more modest and more humane, and eschews parisian intellectualism in favor of an earthly commonsense. At a time when anthropology has clearly fallen out of fashion, he reconnects the wider public with the plight of a discipline that has a direct relevance for our multicultural and cosmopolitan present. But let's face it: as far as social science is concerned, this book has severe limitations. It paints a mythical picture of Africa, reinforcing stereotypes about the dark continent and the distant Other. It samples theories and approaches, without a firm commitment to a methodological tradition. It is self-centered on the person of the author, and it treats anthropology as a means of individual fulfillment as opposed to useful social knowledge. It remains politically ambiguous, whereas the issues Stoller addresses demand a political treatment. It straddles different types of literatures, and mixes ethnography with the autobiography, the *Bildungsroman*, the travelogue, the journalistic inquiry, the illness narrative, and the book of wisdom. Its ambition to present a "living anthropology" contradicts the professional ethos, which clearly distinguishes the public and the private. In sum, anthropology is what anthropologists write, within the boundaries of their discipline and subject to the review of their peers; not what they live or experience. A living anthropology seems to me a contradiction in terms. Let's start with the first criticism of exoticism and naturalizing a mythical Africa. Paul Stoller first set foot in Africa as a Peace Corps volunteer teaching English in Tera, an isolated town west of the Niger River in the Sahel region. He returns to the Republic of Niger as a graduate student doing fieldwork in a remote village among the Songhay, a local tribe that has kept its traditions while sending emigrants to the capital and beyond. Studying divination rituals that defy his rationalist creed, he is challenged by a sorcerer who points to his misgivings: "You look, but you don't see. You listen, but you don't hear. You touch, but you don't feel." It takes him a lifetime to understand what the sorcerer meant by that riddle, and to begin to see, hear, and feel in an enlightened

manner. After this fateful encounter, he enters into apprenticeship with an old sage, who teaches him the basic rules and formulas of Songhai witchcraft. Several years later, and having moved to a teaching position in the US, he uses this esoteric wisdom, and his acquired knowledge of the Songhai language, to study the life of West African traders selling their wares in a New York street market, and then to cope with the personal tragedy of cancer that makes him reassess what is really important in life. He concludes that "the sinuous path I have described in these pages has led me not to some grandiose conclusion about the nature of human being but rather to accept the ultimate impermanence of things." The Africa Stoller describes is the Africa of the village, kept alive by ancient wisdom and pristine cultures. Even though he confesses that "even if it floats in the river for one hundred years, a log can never become a crocodile," meaning he can never turn native, he feels permanently in between cultures, and he uses "the power of the between" to develop a personal perspective on the indeterminacies and the contingency of life. He returns to his master sorcerer regularly, and follows rites of initiation that parallel his career as a scholar. The Africa he returns to seems to be stuck in time, embedded in a perpetual cycle of repetition that defies the laws of history. The village and the small town appear as isolated locales, remote from the booming cities that have come to characterize the African landscape. Indeed, the African city provides the missing link between the bush and the New York street markets that he described in a previous book, *Money Has No Smell* (see my review [here](#)). Enmeshed in transnational networks, the city calls for a different anthropology, straddling different life worlds and defying attempts to fix people in one place and one single identity. Anthropology is characterized by different research traditions, both in terms of method and as a theoretical framework. These schools of thought contribute to the accumulation of knowledge, and give coherence to the overly ambitious project of building a "science of man". Paul Stoller draws from different philosophical schools--sociolinguistics, structuralism, postmodernism, phenomenology--as one would experiment with alternate medicine or new age beliefs, hopping from one to the next without a coherent plan or a directing line. He also experiments with different writing styles, adapting his textual strategy to each body of fieldwork material he is gathering. His cultural background clearly shows in this eclecticism: he came of age in the hippie counterculture of the seventies, when one would drive a Volkswagen from Texas to San Francisco and get stoned along the way. As in his African odyssey, he is in search of the ultimate guru, the person who will reveal the deep meaning of life. His scholarly path takes him "far and wide in search of explanations, knowledge, and wisdom". He claims this eclecticism and humility as a virtue. But his modesty prevents him to offer his own theoretical synthesis, and to compete with the giants of the discipline in order to leave his imprint on accumulated knowledge. He presents himself

as a disciple of various masters, but gives no hint as to whether his teaching has led others to follow his path of scholarly wisdom. He may be a master storyteller; but an intellectual hero he is not. Trying to make sense of apparently irrational beliefs, his first impulse was to turn to structuralism and to uncover abstract patterns and categories that underly all social and cultural diversity. His early heroes are Noam Chomsky and Claude Levi-Strauss, who believed in a singular rationality founded upon transcendent principles of logic that are universally applicable no matter the sociocultural context. His PhD thesis, based on his fieldwork among the Songhay, focuses on how language is used in the competition for power. Spending a year in Paris at the Laboratoire d'anthropologie sociale headed by Levi-Strauss, he doesn't find answers to his quest for the ultimate truth ("what is structuralism?", he asks another member of the laboratory, who answers laughingly that "no one around here really knows"), but he discovers alternative truths by attending the lectures of Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault at the College de France. This leads him "to cast critical doubt on rationalist projects in which universal principles rendered invisible and insignificant local cultural realities." He then turns to Clifford Geertz and his "anti-anti relativism", which he defines as "an attempt to temper relativism with good sense". Philosophically, he is drawn to phenomenology, "an attempt to describe human consciousness in its lived immediacy before it is subject to theoretical elaboration or conceptual systematizing." He is also influenced by postmodernist ambitions to clear disciplinary spaces for "experiments" in ethnographic expressions, with narrative ethnographies that featured dialogue, characterization, and plot. He publishes a couple of novels along the way. He also maintains his youthful commitment to Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism as a philosophy of life and to Andre Breton's surrealism as a form of artistic expression. Faced with the challenge of writing texts that reflects his variegated experience, he concludes that "there is no one way to write an ethnographic text. Each body of ethnographic material is unique and therefore requires a specifically contoured textual strategy." Some people think anthropology is here to save the world; Stoller believes anthropology is here to save the self. He looks to spiritual truth as a means for self-accomplishment, the way he practices yoga to maintain physical wellbeing. He agrees that anthropology can serve useful social purposes, but for him the individual is paramount. Other people had higher ambitions for the discipline. Emile Durkheim, the leader of the French school of sociology, famously declared that "our research efforts would not be worth one hour of trouble if they had no other interest than a merely speculative one." Similarly, Stoller keeps his politics to himself, which is not necessarily a bad thing. But one would have liked him to draw political conclusions from his research, whether in terms of assessing the postcolonial present in Africa, of challenging American immigration policies that leave so many

African migrants as unregistered aliens, or of linking the plight of cancer patients to US healthcare system reform initiatives. He concludes his illness narrative by stating: "I now believe that one of our most important obligation is to use our skills to bear witness." But the witness he presents is always an individual: there is no place for a "we" or for a collective endeavor in his narrative. Readers may not agree with all the critiques presented above. I may have been a bit unfair: I have to confess that I liked the book, and that reading it made me think hard about the goals and methods of anthropology. Many limitations that I pointed out are not Stoller's own, and may characterize modern anthropology as it is practiced in the US. Social scientists writing from their ivory tower have little incentive to engage in collective work. At least Paul Stoller made the effort to go "out there", and to challenge his own Western assumptions in order to understand how people tick. Quote Geertz: "If we wanted home truths, we should have stayed at home." Against the excesses of multi-sited ethnographies that sample terrains without setting up tent anywhere, I fully subscribe to his remark that in order to "understand contemporary worlds scholars must opt for dwelling rather than travel, for theory shaped by data rather than vignette." But his odyssey bears the mark of a time when counterculture kids would hit the road in search of the ultimate wisdom. Judged from a contemporary perspective, his attempt to find a personal guru seems out of date, and his modest ambition to pose as one is overstretched.

Interesting thoughts about neither being here or there. Sometimes a little bit too specific

Written with humor and wisdom. Meditative. Author's many rich experiences draw reader into the cultures with a desire for learning, understanding and wanting more.

A good read. It is the type of work you don't forget. Stoller's does particularly good work discussing cancer and the liminal state. Read as part of freshman anthropology course at UCLA.

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