Abstract: This article addresses the challenges a neoliberal conception of agency poses to anthropologists. I first discuss the kind of self that a neoliberal agency presupposes, in particular a self that is a flexible bundle of skills that reflexively manages oneself as though the self was a business. I then explore the dilemmas this neoliberal agency poses to different scholarly imaginations. I conclude by proposing that a neoliberal agency creates relationships that are morally lacking and overlooks differences in scale, deficiencies that an anthropological imagination would be able to critique effectively.
Anthropologists used to have a captivating weapon in their analytical toolkit. They used to be able to catapult their work into having political purchase by claiming that all that humans know and do is socially constructed. To say with a relativist’s conviction that the world could be otherwise used to be a way to wield possibility against power.¹ Seeing the social as constructed was liberating when faced with people who naturalized power in order to exercise power. No more. Neoliberal constructions of agency have wilted the efficacy of this formerly reliable insight. Neoliberal perspectives have incorporated as a central belief the knowledge that all that is social could be otherwise. Faced with this, what ethical analytical labor should anthropologists perform when confronted with neoliberal perspectives?

Recently various anthropologists have recommended that scholars interrogating neoliberalism should insist on discussing its local manifestations instead of framing it as an overarching, unified and coherent global trend (see Hoffman, DeHart and Collier 2006; Kipnis 2008; Freeman 2007; Kingsolver and Maskovsky 2008). These authors take issue with the view that neoliberalism has been globally successful as “an encompassing hegemonic project” (Hoffman, DeHart and Collier 2006: 10) involving “the de-statization of governmental activity and the marketization of labor and budgetary austerity policies.” (Hoffman, DeHart and Collier 2006: 11) They argue that ethnographers’ task should be to understand neoliberalism as situated, to analyze how neoliberal
policies are transformed and often re-configured as they are transported and implemented in new locales. How people in Latin America experience neoliberalism as economic policies brought from the Global North differs substantively from people’s experience of neoliberalism as an alternative to socialism in Eastern European countries. Kingfisher and Maskovsky (2008) continue this critique of neoliberalism as uniformly hegemonic in a recent special issue of *Critique of Anthropology*, suggesting that neoliberal policies are partial and incompletely instantiated. They argue:

“our theorization of neoliberalism positions it as a project with totalizing desires . . . to remake the subject, reassert and/or consolidate particular class relations, realign the public and the private, and reconfigure relations of governance – all with direct implications for the production of wealth and poverty, and for raced, gendered and sexualized relations of inequality – and as a project whose totalizing desires are rarely fully realized, because it never operates in a vacuum.” (Kingfisher and Maskovsky 2008: 118)

They recommend that scholars pay attention to the fissures and limits in neoliberal policies that occur when they are implemented.

In this keywords essay, I suggest that for anthropologists when faced with neoliberal perspectives, insisting on the local is an important step but insufficient, because neoliberal perspectives themselves also take context to be crucially formative. Pointing out local particularities will not necessarily do the unsettling work this move once accomplished. I argue that precisely because of the ways in which neoliberal perspectives rely on a particular form of agency, the most effective form of anthropological critique would be to emphasize people’s epistemological differences and social organization, a form of analysis that many
anthropologists have abandoned in the wake of a disciplinary-wide rejection of the culture concept.

Some readers may be surprised by my claim that anthropological and neoliberal perspectives will both assume that subjects and markets are made, not given. Yet from Friederich Hayek\(^2\) to President George W. Bush’s administration, neoliberal thinkers have been arguing that both people and reality are constructs. Hayek claims that individuals do not exist a priori, that selves come into being through social interactions. He writes: “experience is not a function of mind or consciousness, but mind and consciousness are rather a product of experience.” (Hayek 1984: 226) Such social interactions produce selves as well as social orders simultaneously. For Hayek, not all social orders are created equal; the market is a better social order than any other. But there is nothing inevitable or natural about the market and the selves that the market produces. This belief in social construction is not only restricted to Hayek and other neoliberal scholars.\(^3\) In a New York Times Magazine article, an anonymous senior aide to Bush outlines the White House perspective to Ron Suskind.

> “The aide said that guys like me were "in what we call the reality-based community," which he defined as people who "believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality." I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. "That's not the way the world really works anymore," he continued. "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality -- judiciously, as you will -- we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors . . . and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do." (Suskind 2004)
Critics of neoliberalism have also noted that neoliberalism introduces a new approach to reality and empiricism. In particular, Michel Foucault (Lemke 2001) and Wendy Brown (2003; 2006) both view a major distinction between neoliberalism and liberalism to be the neoliberal emphasis on market rationality as an achieved state. Neither people nor markets are naturally economically rational, market rationality is a perspective and set of practices created by state effort through various policies. Foucault characterizes the German and Austrian school of neoliberal economists in the following terms:

In the *Ordo*-liberal scheme, the market does not amount to a natural economic reality, with intrinsic laws that the art of government must bear in mind and respect; instead, the market can be constituted and kept alive only by dint of political interventions. In this view, like the market, competition, too, is not a natural fact always already part and parcel of the economic domain. Instead, this fundamental economic mechanism can function only if support is forthcoming to bolster a series of conditions, and adherence to the latter must consistently be guaranteed by legal measures. [Lemke 2001: 193]

Foucault here is delineating how post-war German and Austrian neoliberal economic theorists viewed both the market and competition as alternatives that would not necessarily be enacted without state intervention. He goes further by suggesting that these theorists viewed capitalism as having various forms, all of which were historically contingent. For these neoliberal theorists, only the appropriate social policies supporting the entrepreneurial form of rationality could ensure that the right form of capitalism would dominate (Lemke 2001: 195).

Brown, like Foucault, is interested in how this belief--that market rationality is but one alternative--shapes neoliberal desires for a strongly interventionist state, albeit
one structured according to market principles. Foucault and Brown emphasize the implications of the view that market rationality is an achievement for political practices. In this article, I am addressing what the ethical implications are for doing ethnography in neoliberal contexts.

In *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, David Harvey traces how such poorly circulated theories of economic practices were transformed over time into the well-known policies many know recognize as the hallmarks of neoliberalism—“deregulation, privatization, and withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provision” (Harvey 2005: 3). As Harvey points out, while neoliberal states withdrew from some arenas, the governments increased their interventions in other arenas in their efforts to construct social and political environments that actively encouraged market rationality. Harvey argues that these shifts from liberal economic policies to neoliberal policies were also necessarily accompanied by relatively successful efforts to promote new conceptions of what it means to be an individual and an agent (Harvey 2005: 42). In short, in order for neoliberal policies to be implemented, people on the ground had to start engaging with (and perhaps performing) neoliberal concepts of agency.

In the following sections, I outline the contours of neoliberal agency that people who are the targets of neoliberal policies are now facing. I then explore why a neoliberal concept of agency might prove to be uniquely challenging for U.S. anthropologists. While people with a neoliberal perspective might agree with anthropologists that social and economic orders must be actively created, a
neoliberal perspective is additionally prescriptive by working towards universalizing forms of neoliberal agency. Spreading neoliberalism entails convincing others that everyone should enact corporate form of agency, produced by consciously using a means-ends calculus that balances alliances, responsibility and risk. Other forms of agency are getting pushed aside. In the final sections, I argue that anthropologists have inadvertently participated in this because we have for the most part discarded the culture concept, which provided an analytical toolkit for revealing practical and productive alternatives to neoliberal agency. For disciplinary reasons, we now refuse to perform the analytical labor that might be one of the most effective ways to write against neoliberal practices. Note that I am calling for a return to an anthropological imagination, not a return to the culture concept. I am suggesting that anthropologists need to find techniques for continuing the unsettling analytical work that culture used to accomplish for anthropologists by compelling us to pay attention to epistemological difference and social organization simultaneously.

**Neoliberal Concept of Agency**

The shift from economic liberalism to neoliberalism affects the concept of agency in two important ways. I have already alluded to the first shift -- that subjects, markets, economic rationality, and competition are all recognized as socially constructed under neoliberalism. The second shift is a move from the liberal vision of people owning themselves as though they were property to a
neoliberal vision of people owning themselves as though they were a business.\textsuperscript{9}

From a liberal perspective, people own their bodies and their capacities to labor, capacities they can sell in the market.\textsuperscript{10} In contrast, by seeing people as businesses,\textsuperscript{11} a neoliberal perspective presumes that people own their skills and traits, that they are “a collection of assets that must be continually invested in, nurtured, managed, and developed.” (Martin 2000: 582, see also Leve, this issue)

In this next section, I discuss what this shift implies for a neoliberal concept of agency by discussing neoliberal selves, neoliberal relations and neoliberal understandings of social organization.

A neoliberal perspective presumes that every social analyst on the ground should ideally use market rationality to interpret their social relationships and social strategies. This concept of agency requires a reflexive stance in which people are subjects for themselves--a collection of processes to be managed. There is always already a presumed distance to oneself as an actor. One is never “in the moment,” rather, one is always faced with one’s self as a project that must be consciously steered through various possible alliances and obstacles. This is a self that is produced through an engagement with a market, that is, neoliberal markets require participants to be reflexive managers of their abilities and alliances. Critics of neoliberalism have referred to this relationship to the self in a variety of ways--Barbara Cruikshank describes it as the will to empower (1999), Nikolas Rose portrays it as “one becomes a subject for oneself” (Rose 1990: 240), and Wendy Brown as “the capacity for ‘self-care.’” (Brown 2006: 694) Each
scholar is referring to this reflexive relationship in which every self is meant to contain a distance that enables a person to be literally their own business.

Managing the self involves taking oneself to be a collection of skills or traits that can enter into alliances with other such collections. In her elegant genealogy of how communication has come to be a set of work-related skills in the twentieth century, Bonnie Urciuoli addresses how recent college graduates easily describe themselves as “a bundle of skills” as they attempt to find employment (Urciuoli 2008). As Urciuoli illustrates, when one becomes a bundle of ill-defined but highly flexible skills, one becomes a fragmented self of usable traits. This is distinct from other fragmented selves that readers may have encountered in other scholarly dialogues. This is not Goffman’s fragmented self re-defined by each context, in which the agency that people express lies in aligning their given roles with their current context (Goffman 1981). Nor is this a postmodern self, a pastiche of narratives and historical trajectories without a central unifying consciousness. And lastly, this is not the partible person, a nexus of relationships that are foregrounded or backgrounded as the person moves through different contexts (Strathern 1988). Instead, this is a self that is comprised of usable traits. These skills, traits or marketable capacities are what the neoliberal agent brings to relationships. Notice that relationships do not constitute the neoliberal self entirely. Unlike the three selves just mentioned, the reflexive aspect of the neoliberal self exists prior to relationships and contexts, and actively decides how he or she will connect to other people, institutions, and
contexts. In this sense, the neoliberal self is autonomous\textsuperscript{13}. While this self exists prior to relationships, it is still socially constructed, albeit by itself as reflexive manager. It is only reflexivity that is presumed to be prior to social or self construction in this perspective.

If neoliberal selves exist prior to relationships, what are relationships under neoliberalism? They are alliances that should be based on market rationality. Under liberalism, an employer rented the worker’s body and labor capacity for a set amount of time in exchange for a wage. Under neoliberalism, the employer and the worker enter into a business partnership, albeit an unequal partnership.\textsuperscript{14} The worker provides a skill set that can be enhanced according to the employer’s requirements -- part of what is being offered is the worker’s reflexive ability to be an improvable subject.

By framing social relationships as market alliances, a neoliberal perspective re-figures the ways in which governments and employers are obligated to citizens and workers. Under liberalism, the idealized social contract ensures that individuals give up some of their autonomy in exchange for some security, economic or otherwise. Under neoliberalism, relationships are two or more neoliberal collectives creating a partnership that distributes responsibility and risk so that each can maintain their own autonomy as market actors. Rankin (2001) points out how this plays out in Nepalese micro-credit schemes geared towards women. She argues in the following passage that these development projects
insisted that the Nepali participants value the microcredit lenders’ risk in loaning amounts:

The scope from profiting from women’s participation, however, depends on their organization in ‘solidarity’ (or ‘borrower’) groups, which become mechanisms for ‘slash {ing} administrative costs’, ‘motivating repayment’, and ‘introducing financial discipline through peer pressure’ (Yaron 1991, vii). . . . Within the framework of neoliberal rationality, then, solidarity groups assume as their primary objective the financial health of microcredit programmes, rather than the welfare (indeed, solidarity) of the rural population. (Rankin 2001: 29)

Under this neoliberal scheme, women are encouraged to manage themselves as individual entrepreneurs allied with other entities also framed as entrepreneurs—the other women as well as the microcredit bank. Every relationship is a business partnership, some based on shared collective traits and others based on goals perceived as mutually satisfying. The care neoliberal agents must take, as Rankin’s example illustrates, is to minimize the risk and “misallocated” responsibility that these partnerships can potentially lead to.

In short, with this view of relationships and selves in the background, neoliberal agency emerges as conscious choices that balance alliances, responsibility, and risk using a means-ends calculus. The freedom that neoliberalism provides is to be an autonomous agent negotiating for goods and services in a context where every other agent should ideally be also acting like a business partner and competitor.

Several scholars have critiqued neoliberalism for framing freedom only in terms of choice (see John and Jean Comaroff, ed. 2001). This critique condenses
two strands underlying how people can exhibit neoliberal agency. They are criticizing the ways in which decisions are made on a pre-structured terrain, people’s choices are between limited possibilities, with the structural reasons for the limitations systematically overlooked. In other words, freedom becomes consumer choice, deciding between pre-determined options.

Yet, under neoliberalism, choice is resonant with but not entirely subsumed as consumer choice. As O’Malley (1996) suggests, choice is also always an engagement with risk. O’Malley points out that from a neoliberal perspective, risk is not inevitably a negative, but a necessary component of opportunity and achievement. Without risk, the neoliberal actor could not succeed\(^{15}\).

... risk is a source or condition of opportunity, an avenue for enterprise and the creation of wealth, and thus an unavoidable and invaluable part of a progressive environment. ... Clearly, neoliberalism would regard many specific risks as ones that can and should be prevented or minimized. ... For neo-liberalism it is always necessary to ask “Which risk?” before deciding whether a constricting or a sustaining response is required. (O’Malley 1996: 204).

According to the neoliberal perspective, to prosper, one must engage with risk. All neoliberal social strategies center on this. Managing risk frames how neoliberal agents are oriented towards the future. And it is implicit in this orientation that neoliberal agents are responsible for their own futures--they supposedly fashion their own futures through their decisions. By the same token, regardless of their disadvantages and the unequal playing field, actors are maximally responsible for their failures (Brown 2003).
Instead of equating freedom with choice, it might be more apt to say that neoliberalism equates freedom with the ability to act on one’s own calculations. Freedom of this kind is inevitably unstable, especially since, in capitalism, calculating to one’s advantage is all too frequently also calculating to someone else’s disadvantage. Neoliberal agents require external forms of regulation to shape the perilous relationships they are forming with each other. I am not suggesting that they are Hobbesian selves—brutish, greedy and moral only when faced with a greater force. Yet their calculations are not going to combine into a national or multinational good without active intervention. Hayek suggests that law can be the source of this effective external intervention. “The functioning of a competition not only requires adequate organization of certain institutions like money, markets, and channels of information—some of which can never be adequately provided by private enterprise—but it depends, above all, on the existence of an appropriate legal system, a legal system designed both to preserve competition and to make it operate as beneficially as possible.” (Hayek 1944: 87)

Competition’s pitfalls ensure that neoliberal agents’ calculations are not likely to produce a functioning market unless law actively intervene to ensure that competition is regulated properly (Burchell 1996; Lemke 2001).

The government’s role is not to protect people from the exigencies of bad business practices. After all, people under a neoliberal perspective are imagined to behave as businesses themselves – there is no longer a distinction in kind. Government’s role, instead, is to protect businesses from the exigencies of other
businesses’ bad practices. When all agents are seen through the lens of business management, law’s function is to safeguard everyone’s autonomy and appropriate engagement with risk as businesses.

Laws have recently proliferated astonishingly, in part as neoliberalism’s preferred technology of regulation. John and Jean Comaroff (2001) argue that this occurs because laws are widely recognized as technologies that allow people with fundamentally different perspectives and interests to negotiate effectively with each other. Laws are seen as a neutral medium, and as such offer a universal means through which anyone can negotiate with anyone else. They write: “In so doing, it forges the impression of consonance among contrast, of the existence of universal standards that, like money, facilitate the negotiation of incommensurables across otherwise intransitive boundaries.” (Comaroff 2001: 329) Part of what enables laws as a medium to accomplish this “negotiation of incommensurables” is how, for laws to function in this way, it must be understood to be both outside of and constitutive of context. Laws are understood to transcend circumstances while still being applicable to these circumstances. This particular form of explicitness allows laws to be a technology peculiarly well-suited for neoliberal efforts to create alliances that pay no heed to scale.

I am suggesting that law is particularly useful because of its capacity to define entities as equal, or at least commensurate, despite wide disparities in size and internal organization. In other words, law has the potential to operate by misrecognizing levels of scale, a potential that neoliberalism finds especially
useful. The neoliberal model of agency insists that all agents are fashioned as autonomous rational calculators, with size and functional ability the primary factors for creating distinctions. So individual people are simply smaller versions of corporations, communities are interchangeable with small businesses—in this sense neoliberal agency is fractal. At all levels, the units and their interactions are supposedly organized and intertwined in the same way. Yet unlike other social fractals (see Green 2005; Mosko and Damon, ed. 2005; Strathern 1991; Wagner 1991), neoliberal agents frequently cross levels of scale in forging connections—for example, multinational banks make alliances with a microcredit group of five women. For agents to function, they must often have alliances or encounter risks by interacting with agents of varying sizes. These alliances require regulations to be sustained effectively, and law’s explicitness and relationship to context makes law a productive vehicle for regulating agents of different sizes.

The ways in which neoliberal agency is fractal become apparent when one examines a neoliberal take on culture and cultural difference. Under neoliberalism, culture shifts from being a perspective that explains connections to being a possession, or trait, that engenders alliances. From a neoliberal perspective, culture and identity are one and the same (see Leve, this volume). Both are a set of traits or even skills that people can possess and market through tourist performances, media forms, food, clothes, art and so on. That is, culture from a neoliberal perspective serves not to explain contexts, but rather to explain individuals’ behavior. Individuals can possess culture/identity in the same way
that communities can possess culture/identity. This is another way in which the neoliberal perspective allows for misrecognitions of scale. For a neoliberal conception of both culture and identity, not only is the type of possession the same, people and communities can also consciously deploy their culture/identity to engage with the market to their advantage. Susan Cook describes how the Bafokeng in South Africa use this new possibility to their advantage. “Using platinum royalties to finance entities such as the Royal Bafokeng Economic Board, Royal Bafokeng Resources, and Royal Bafokeng Finance, Kgosi (King) Leruo and his management team envision the Bafokeng Nation as a company (or more accurately, a conglomerate), with ordinary Bafokeng as shareholders.” (Cook 2005: 129) The Bafokeng leaders are re-imagining kingship in corporate terms, and in the process, are taking over many of the services the nation-state previously was supposed to provide. “...it is the Bafokeng authorities who deliver water, electricity, and waste removal. Ambulance and fire services are provided by the Bafokeng community. Roads, street lighting, and community halls are built with Bafokeng money.” (Cook 2005: 133-134). Cook describes how neoliberal South African government policies encourage a decentralization that allows one group to re-invent tribal authority as a corporate authority, and in the process re-negotiate new forms of autonomy from the nation-state. As long as King Leruo acts as the head of a corporation in his relationships with the South African government, the government supports this practice.¹⁸ In short, neoliberal policies allow agency to
be attributed to different sizes of social unities, as long as the social unities cooperate in acting corporate.

Unlike under liberalism, shared traits can serve as a basis for collective action without endangering the neoliberal status quo. People operating with a neoliberal perspective have begun to find acceptable the indigenous communities and other social unities that were previously seen as demanding collective property rights in the wrong ways (as opposed to corporations which are collective property holding institutions in market friendly ways). Both Charles Hale (2005) and John and Jean Comaroff (n.d.) have pointed out that neoliberal policies are perfectly willing to accommodate indigenous claims, provided that the indigenous are willing to treat their culture as a corporation would, as an asset, skill or commodity. Hale addresses this in terms of collective land rights in the following passage:

. . . collective land rights actually help advance the neoliberal model by rationalizing land tenure, reducing the potential for chaos and conflict, and locking the community into a mindset that makes it more difficult for expansive political alternatives to emerge.
(Hale 2005: 18)

In short, ethnic or indigenous movements and neoliberalism are not antithetical as long as the cultural difference at stake can be commodified or otherwise marketed.

Under a neoliberal perspective, culture is not the only familiar anthropological category that is re-configured. Social organization also changes. For anthropologists, social organization stands for complex techniques for
differentiating and interweaving people as embodied relationships. From a neoliberal perspective, social organization emerges as market strategies that determine the consequences of alliances between different sizes of corporate entities and different skill sets. Anthropologists analyze social organization to understand how people embody relationships and in doing so extend and re-configure these relationships across time. A neoliberal perspective requires interpreting social organization in terms of unequal alliances and competitions, all centered around navigating the autonomy, interdependency and responsibility of each (corporate) entity involved. Differentiation between entities occurs through contrasts in size and skill sets.

In differentiating between skill sets, the neoliberal perspective creates a new status for the expert--the expert becomes someone with the unique reflexive role of explaining to other autonomous entities how to manage themselves more successfully. Selves may intend to choose and risk well, but the potential for failure always haunts such projects. When failures occur, the responsible self turns to an expert to learn how to choose more effectively. Nikolas Rose explains: “The self is to style its life through acts of choice, and when it cannot conduct its life according to this norm of choice, it is to seek expert assistance” (1996:158). Experts embody an external reflexive corrective that a self can choose to remedy unsuccessful self-management (and thus continuing to be responsible for their own failures). While law may be the neoliberal preferred
technology of regulation when relations go awry, experts are the neoliberal preferred technology of regulation when selves go awry.

Thus the issue of differentiating through skill sets has an immediacy for anthropologists--from a neoliberal perspective, they are hireable experts. Anthropological knowledge itself can be useful from a neoliberal perspective by re-interpreting cultural contexts into maps of risk or providing techniques for transforming unpredictable others into people one can negotiate with. Yet this translation occurs in ways that are not immediately or obviously accountable from a neoliberal perspective, that is, the relationships are not easily available to be regulated. When evidence of anthropological expertise is recast as market-based alliances, then anthropologists are understood as transforming their relationships with their interlocutors in the field into capacities. Yet anthropologists often become experts without enhancing the marketable capacities of their interlocutors in the field. This creates the possibility that experts such as anthropologists might be creating relationships that undermine the market-defined interests of their interlocutors. From a neoliberal perspective, this unequal alliance is a relationship particularly susceptible to abuse. To prevent this abuse, these relationships must become accountable, available for audit. Several scholars have commented on the ethical and structural dilemmas of neoliberal audit cultures for anthropologists and other scholars (Strathern 2000; Lederman 2006). Here I am inverting the perspective, and suggesting that a neoliberal concept of agency
might encourage certain institutions, such as IRBs, to see the anthropological relationship as prone to unethical abuses requiring regulation.

To sum up, a neoliberal perspective assumes that the actors who create and are created by the most ideal social order are those who reflexively and flexibly manage themselves as one owns and manages a business, tending to one’s own qualities and traits as owned and even improvable assets. Many aspects of selves and the social world become re-defined as a result, even culture has become a trait that can serve as a basis for or enhance people’s alliances with others. Another transformation has been to how one has agency--anyone or group that is agentive should be agentive as a corporative entity. At the same time, these actors have alliances with others, alliances that ideally should be distributing risk and responsibility so that no corporate entity bears another’s risks. These actors can not be relied upon to police themselves and their own alliances effectively, and as a result, laws becomes the central medium for regulating practices. Laws are uniquely appropriate for neoliberal policing because they contain the potential to overlook the intricacies of social organization—laws can accommodate misrecognitions of scale. In short, a neoliberal perspective of agency depends on transforming liberalism’s possessive individualism (Macpherson 1962) into corporate individualism, viewing all agents as commensurate corporate entities so that social organization or differences in scale can be ignored.

*Neoliberalism and the Anthropological Imagination*
With this overview of neoliberal agency in mind, I turn now to the analytical techniques anthropologists have available to critique neoliberal views of agency. I first discuss what an anthropological imagination entails, comparing it to a sociological imagination to clarify through contrast. Then, mindful of many anthropologists’ current disavowal of the culture concept, I suggest that the culture concept in the past had enabled ethnographers to imagine the possibilities of other forms of personhood, relationality, and agency. This analytical labor is crucial at the current moment, and anthropologists have not found other techniques for continuing to perform the intellectual labor that culture once allowed us to accomplish. Without culture or a comparable analytical concept in our toolkit, we risk allowing neoliberal assumptions about agency to dominate our analyses, if only by default.

In asking what collusions one hazards in exercising a particular imagination in a neoliberal age, I want to distinguish an anthropological imagination from a sociological imagination. These terms admittedly have disciplinary resonances with university institutions, journals and conferences that provide people arenas in which to practice the distinctions between these two forms of social imagination. The disciplinary resonances are not my primary focus, however. For example, I am not suggesting that all anthropologists have an anthropological imagination, or that all sociologists have a sociological imagination. Indeed, anthropologists frequently turn to a sociological imagination in attempts to parse neoliberalism. Through this comparison, I show that there
are multiple techniques for providing local context to neoliberal policies, and that the anthropological imagination is uniquely effective at revealing some of neoliberalism’s vulnerabilities.

In comparing an anthropological imagination with a sociological imagination, I am relying on C. Wright Mills’ coinage (Mills 1959). Mills defines a sociological imagination as one in which people understand their personal difficulties and privileges in terms of larger institutional or structural forces. This imagination entails understanding an individual’s local circumstances in terms of a larger political and economic context. In Mills’ own words:

“For that imagination is the capacity to shift from one perspective to another--from the political to the psychological; from examination of a single family to comparative assessment of the nation budgets of the world . . . It is the capacity to range from the most impersonal and remote transformations to the most intimate features of the human self--and to see the relations between the two. Back of its use there is always the urge to know the social and historical meaning of the individual in the society and in the period in which he has his quality and his being.” (Mills 1959: 7)

Mills is suggesting that the sociological imagination crosses levels of scale to produce insight, interrogating how practices at different levels of scale affect each other. The puzzle here for the ethnographer is to understand how their sociological imagination diverges from their interlocutors’, and what the consequences of that divergence might be. An ethnographer may see one person’s unemployment as the result of outsourcing, while the one unemployed may see being fired as the result of systemic sexism or racism. In short, the sociological imagination encourages ethnographers to differentiate themselves from their
interlocutors by juxtaposing different understandings of how levels of scale interconnect.

An anthropological imagination\(^2\) looks at how epistemologies\(^2\) and social organizations are interconnected and practiced. With a sociological imagination, the challenge is to understand how the personal is connected to the political,\(^2\) so to speak. With an anthropological imagination, the challenge is to understand how the ways that people engage with knowledge and engage with each other are always already interwoven.\(^2\) For social theorists, the emphasis may vary. Some scholars stress how particular epistemological assumptions are enacted, while others focus on how relationships connect and differentiate people. In general, the anthropological imagination explores how practiced epistemologies shape and are shaped by the structures of relationships.

For scholars who wish to write against neoliberalism, neoliberalism’s conception of agency presents challenges in different ways depending on which imagination the scholar exercises. When social analysts use a sociological imagination to think about neoliberalism, they immediately face the challenge of having to figure out how scale differentiates between social unities. As I mentioned earlier, neoliberalism flattens the nuances of scale in as much as all relationships across levels of scale are supposed to be structured as alliances between corporate entities -- the relationship between the woman and the microcredit bank, the indigenous community and the nation, the head of state and the transnational corporation, and so on. Hayek writes: “When individuals
combine in a joint effort to realize ends they have in common, the organizations, like the state, that they form for this purpose are given their own system of ends and their own means. But any organization thus formed remains one “person” among others, in the case of the state much more powerful than any of the others, it is true, yet still with its separate and limited sphere in which alone its ends are supreme.”

Under neoliberalism, all entities, regardless of size and internal social organization, become the same type of corporate entity. Yet people confronting neoliberal policies rarely experience differences in scale as differences in size instead of differences in kind.

Turning to a sociological imagination to examine neoliberal practices can often be used to great advantage. Elizabeth Dunn provides an illuminating and subtle example in her study of why botulism has become so prevalent in post-socialist Georgia. Inspired by James Ferguson’s discussion of enclaves of capitalism (2005), Dunn argues that neoliberal policies do not in fact encourage governments to make alliances with everyone. Some people are left out of neoliberal networks, often to their detriment. She describes how, when Georgia was still a Soviet republic, canned goods became an icon of what was positive in people’s relationships to their nation. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the neoliberal government practices have not continued effective regulation or dissemination of information about safe canning practices. Instead the complex networks that once linked state bureaucracy and kitchen no longer exist, leading to a rise in botulism. Dunn writes: “The jars of vegetables that once were infused
by the state are not elements reincorporated into neoliberal projects but have definitely become nonstate spaces free from regulation or standardization. This is what has turned the family cupboards once regulated by Soviet bureaucracy into zones of unpredictability and danger. The rate of botulism, which has tripled since 1990, indicates that the Georgian food sector has not become bound up in a transnational neoliberal project but, instead has become a zone uncontrolled by the state.” (Dunn 2008: 255). Dunn’s study shows that when examining how neoliberal policies attempt to fashion selves, it is as important to study the disconnections and the selves overlooked.

What an anthropological imagination foregrounds is the ways in which engaging with a neoliberal perspective is always a process of translation, translation that often is accompanied by difficult social conundrums. In a sense, neoliberal theorists already know that spreading market rationality is a labor that transforms. This is a corollary of the assumption that markets must be constructed and continually maintained, markets are not givens. An anthropological imagination offers analytical tools that reveal that this neoliberal labor is not merely one of replacement but continual translation, in which people continually struggle to make neoliberal principles livable given their other understandings of how one is social.

I have already discussed one ethnographic analysis of such a translation project – Cook’s account of how King Lefuro of the Bafokeng navigates two contradictory positions as corporate head and traditional king. Now I turn to
another example, one drawn from Lauren Leve’s article in this special issue.

Lauren Leve’s research among Theravada Buddhists in Nepal brought forth an interesting dilemma: how do Buddhist monks advocate for human rights when the human rights movement presupposes a notion of the self they disavow? These Nepali Buddhists are willing to engage a human rights discourse and a neoliberal discourse (represented by workshops her Buddhist friends offer on Covey’s *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*), while carefully refusing the accompanying practices which inscribe possessive identities. Leve’s analysis reveals how these discourses carry within what she terms an “identity-machine,” ontological assumptions of possessive individualism. At the same time, she also shows how this “identity-machine” can be ignored by Theravada Buddhists’ practices that emerge from other universalizing ontological presuppositions of no-self. Cook foregrounds social organization while Leve emphasizes epistemological differences to show how neoliberal assumptions can be turned aside, or incompletely translated.

In short, scholars with a sociological imagination often interrogate neoliberalism by tracing how people connect their personal experiences to other levels of scale, analyzing how their interlocutors’ use their sociological imagination to make the local. I have been suggesting that this is not enough. Making the local, as I have discussed earlier, too easily lends itself to one of neoliberalism’s aims -- to acknowledge variety for the sake of increasing possible alliances and developing more nuanced or specific markets. Difference is not
neoliberalism’s enemy, especially not when these differences can so easily be
figured as homogeneous heterogeneities. An anthropological imagination,
however, insists on making differences visible in ways that undermine neoliberal
efforts to neutralize difference. Yet many anthropologists have eschewed these
analytical strategies, rejecting a focus on epistemological difference and social
organization as too closely tied to the problematic culture concept.

*When Anthropologists Refuse to Write Culture*

That this move away from culture coincides with the rise of neoliberalism
is ironic and even unfortunate since, as Coombe (2005) points out, both
neoliberalism and its critics in many social movements have increasingly found
culture good to think with. Coombe argues that: “under neoliberalism, culture is
being repositioned within as well as differentiated from market forces in state
practices, international policy-making, and social movements that make strategic
recourse to law as they challenge its current limitations” (2005: 52). Neoliberal
policies increasingly find the culture concept useful for marketing and creating
local and distinct markets. At the same time, members of social movements have
begun to take advantage of the promise inherent in the culture concept that people
require more than the limited connections offered by neoliberal conception of
relationships. In short, other critics of neoliberalism have found it useful to speak
against neoliberalism by insisting on culture--why aren’t anthropologists?
When people on the ground engage with neoliberalism, they tend to
describe culture as a possession, a move which presents anthropologists with a
conundrum. Previously, as Marilyn Strathern argues, an anthropological use of
culture:

served to condense and summarise a range of understandings about
aspects of social life; it was not commensurate with these
understandings but an abstraction from them, and thus a figure to
the ground of the anthropological endeavour. Anthropologists
thereby inverted what they took as the indigenous relationship
between the implicit cultural ground of people’s lives and the
particular understandings (figures) which people explicitly
foregrounded. Where culture becomes explicit in people’s
understandings of themselves . . . this particular relation between
figure and ground (and ‘anthropologist’ and ‘people’) collapses.
(Strathern 1995 p. 171, ftn. 6)

As long as anthropologists wielded culture while those they study didn’t, culture
can serve the work of distinguishing between the anthropologist’s analysis and the
people’s analysis. Culture was the implicit unifying field--when an ethnographer
described a culture, he or she was making the invisible contextual glue known.

Strathern points out that culture no longer can do the differentiating work
anthropologists require when everyone knows that they have a culture, especially
when everyone has culture as a possession.

For most of the history of anthropology, culture has not been a possession.

It was often understood as an analytical concept that directed scholars to address
epistemological difference and social organization with the same breath. Culture
was what anthropologists brought to the analysis so as to examine how selves and
sociality are fashioned through perduring practices and assumptions. When the
culture concept traveled outside of anthropological circles however, it gradually came to mean something that selves could possess. Perhaps this is why, at this neoliberal moment, everyone is talking about culture. Culture lends itself to analogies that resonate both with commodities and with commodified identities. This possibility becomes almost a certainty in neoliberal contexts (see John and Jean Comaroff, n.d.). In addition, there is a potential that when people know they have a culture, they can also claim to choose another. Now that culture is easily treated as a possession, it has become even more insidious and compromising for anthropologists to invoke culture. After all, what culture used to accomplish for anthropologists was only possible precisely because it was not a possession, but rather an analytical apparatus that we knew that we were constructing (see Wagner 1981).

The ease with which culture can be figured as a possession is not the only dilemma anthropologists confront when others invoke culture. When culture is made explicit, both scholars and their interlocutors can deploy culture as a form of context. Culture becomes a means to make local that which is being constituted as acultural (and often from elsewhere), for example, laws, commodities, human rights, and democracy. Making culture into a context is how the global and the transnational are translated into local projects. Thus both scholars and their interlocutors often end up using culture for the same scale-making project of refiguring global flows so that they have local effects and local meanings. While culture can be an analytical tool for making objects and contexts local for both
anthropologists and their interlocutors, the consequences of this effort will be
different for each. For anthropologists, using culture to produce the local can be
an end in itself since this task of “re-complexification” (Strathern 1995: 168) also
serves to challenge the strategies by which the form or object makes itself
universal (see Tsing 2005 for a nuanced account of challenges to the universal).
In contrast, for people on the ground, producing the local is a means of extending
or ending relationships. What is a resounding conclusion for anthropologists
proves to be but one step in the process of fashioning connections for their
interlocutors in the field. So while both may make the same analytical moves, the
practical consequences for each are markedly different. Ignoring the difference
between these consequences means ignoring the ethical lesson that
anthropologists in the 1980s trumpeted, to be responsible for the labor and
privilege inherent to ones’ perspective.

In allowing the critique of the culture concept to win the day (for the most
part), anthropologists are largely responding to how postcolonial contexts have
made analyses of agents as cultural especially charged for those writing
ethnographies. For many U.S. anthropologists, the pitfalls culture carries with its
ethnographic application are too unwelcome. Disquieted by the culture concept,
they have chosen to turn to other analytical frameworks entirely, instead of
continuing to dwell with their unease.

Yet refusing culture carries with it a steep price, since understanding
culture has been a useful metonym for exercising an anthropological imagination.
Insisting on culture has been a way to insist on epistemological differences. Culture allows one to begin easily with the premise that people on the ground have shared anticipations of when someone is being spontaneous or being reactive (see Wagner 1995). The concept not only explains other people’s behavior as intelligible and creative but also as actions that engage with perduring and shared expectations and practices. In other words, culture allows one to start with a discussion of how the social analyst on the ground (that is, anthropologists’ interlocutors in the field) might perceive agency and structure in their own social context. When the ethnographer finds these anticipations of others’ behaviors surprising and unexpected, then the ethnographer can begin the work of explanation that differentiates perspectives. Without culture as a touchstone, anthropologists need to find other techniques for deploying their anthropological imagination.

Towards an Ethics of Imagination

Neoliberal perspectives have re-structured what it means to be agentive, to be cultural, and to be relational beings, compelling critics of neoliberalism to re-think old strategies. In this essay, I have been arguing that an anthropological imagination is uniquely suited for delineating where and how neoliberal perspectives fail to provide adequate and equitable ways of living. A neoliberal perspective insists on seeing all social actors, be they people, communities or nation-states, in terms of corporate individualism—a flexible bundle of skills that reflexively manages oneself as though the self was a business. To understand
how this premise travels, I have argued that anthropologists should pay attention
to social organization and epistemological differences. This in turn could lead
scholars to address two of neoliberalism’s weaknesses – its misrecognition of
scale and its inadequacy as a set of moral guidelines.

When one pays attention to the complexities of social organization, it
becomes quickly apparent that this is precisely what a neoliberal perspective
overlooks when it homogenizes all actors into corporate forms that endeavor to
balance alliances, risks and responsibilities. Focusing on social organization
reveals the fallacies in this assumption by showing in detail the alternative
complex hierarchies and structured networks people fashion. Only an eye to
social organization shows the ways in which scale matters – that being a head of a
family is fundamentally different than being a head of a city.

In addition, anthropologists have found that their interlocutors on the
ground often talk about epistemological differences in terms of morality, that
discussing what is moral has become a means for evaluating the new forms of
social relationships people are constantly encountering. In turning to morality,
people are also pointing out that neoliberalism is too flimsy a set of guidelines for
fashioning relationships. Wendy Brown points out that part of neo-
 conservatism’s appeal is the moral certainty with which it supplements a
neoliberal rationality (Brown 2006). A similar dissatisfaction with
neoliberalism’s amorality underlies various attempts to re-moralize business, such
as the fair trade movement. The question, however, is not how to introduce
morality to patch the social gaps neoliberalism creates, the question is how moral insights can battle neoliberal policies.

While people on the ground have found an anthropological imagination useful for speaking back to neoliberalism, anthropologists themselves have found it less appealing. I suspect that this is because an anthropological imagination appears to require the culture concept, making this form of imagination less agreeable for contemporary anthropologists. Yet, as Mikael Karlstrom (2004) points out, our interlocutors increasingly find talking about culture a useful vehicle for insisting on moral interactions that reject neoliberal expectations. Karlstrom argues that people in Buganda have used culture as an idiom to craft the possibility of a more moral future.

Across the twentieth century, Buganda sought to construct and sustain various modes of moral community in the face of disruptive transformations wrought by Buganda’s incorporation into global orders of commerce and polity. Enough of them did so by deploying ‘customary’ institutions and practices of social reproduction beginning in the 1920s and, later, the constellation of related conceptions surrounding the “cultural” kingship to establish these as dominant idioms of collective self-representation and engagement with those transformative processes. On the whole, these idioms seem to have enabled Baganda to sustain an aspirational disposition toward their own political and economic future, even in the face of radical postcolonial abjection. (Karlstrom 2004: 608)

I wish to conclude this essay by suggesting, with Karlstrom, that anthropologists continue to do what we do best, and heed our interlocutors. A sophisticated attention to social organization can reveal the impossibility of neoliberal demands that all relations be constructed as though composed of similar entities operating
according to similar principles.\textsuperscript{30} And a commitment to epistemological difference\textsuperscript{31} can open paths for exploring multiple ways to live morally without relying on the bereft guidelines offered by the unhappy union of neoliberal agency and law. Anthropologists have long practiced developing relationships with others that make visible the nuanced and multiple ways in which people explore how to behave well, precisely what neoliberalism undercuts. It is time to speak to power what our interlocutors already know about--the moral force of different epistemologies and social organizations, instead of hoping that speaking possibility to power is enough.

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1 Debbora Battaglia usefully describes how this can lead to embracing contingency, while resisting its relativist enmeshments (Battaglia 1999).
2 I realize that Hayek himself never called himself a neoliberal, preferring the term classical liberal instead. Yet Hayek’s work has so influenced neoliberal thinkers and neoliberal policies that he serves here as a model of a neoliberal theorist.
3 I am using the freedom allowed by the genre of a keywords essay to describe neoliberal scholars and neoliberal policy-makers with the same broad brushstrokes. There are several varied traditions in neoliberalism, both in the scholarship and in neoliberal practices (see Gamble 2006), that I am overlooking here.
4 While Foucault did not directly discuss neoliberalism in his published work, he gave a series of lectures on two forms of neoliberalism in at the *College de France* in 1978 and 1979. Since the audiotapes are not readily available, I am relying upon Thomas Lemke’s excellent summary and interpretation of the lectures (2001). For a similar discussion of Foucault’s 1978 and 1979 lectures, see Burchell 1996.
5 David Harvey (2005) traces how these economic ideas relegated until the early 1980’s to scholarly recommendations were put into widespread practice.
6 Gamble (2006) argues that there is another strand of neoliberalism that does not support government regulation and intervention.
7 As Stuart Rockefeller points out in this volume, neoliberalism does not demand new conceptions of agency and individuals at every level. Often when neoliberal analyses deploy a global perspective, local individuals are overlooked and agentless flows are emphasized.
8 For a U.S. readership, I want to point out that this liberalism is derived from Adam Smith, Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, not a political liberalism as exemplified by Franklin Roosevelt.
At the same time, neoliberal legal changes have also re-defined what counts as property. For more detailed explorations of shifts in the definitions of property, see Maurer 1999 and Coombe 2005.

The consequences of this assumption have been well-documented by political theorists and ethnographers. See Macpherson 1962 for a concise account.

Lisa Adkins (2005) also argues that a neoliberal perspective is distinct from possessive individualism. She does not, however, argue that under neoliberalism, people manage their selves as though they were businesses. Rather, she argues that qualities of selves are now determined through audience perception, that one is comprised of qualities others have been convinced that one has.

My current research with Facebook and MySpace users suggests that people using these social networking sites also understand the selves they fashion on these websites to be a collection of usable traits that might be a potential basis for alliances. In short, the selves people are imagining they must be for employers and the selves people describe themselves as being for virtual friends are of the same mold.

It is also this theoretical move that allows me to use the terms “neoliberal self” and “neoliberal agent” interchangeably.

There are still vestiges of liberal labor under neoliberal regimes. See Wright (2005) for an account of the gendered consequences of being a liberal laborer in a neoliberal context. She elucidates how Mexican factory women are disadvantaged because they are seen as offering employers stagnant labor capacities instead of improvable skills.

See Zaloom 2004 for an ethnographic account of traders whose selves revolve around managing risk.

For a fuller discussion of how law’s relationship to context lends itself to this fractal task, see Riles 2005.

See Mitchell 2003 for a discussion of how, under neoliberalism, even multiculturalism has turned into a skill set – one can have a skill for managing cultural diversity and able to adapt quickly to different cultural settings.

See Hale 2005 and Tuihiwai Smith 2006 for other examples of neoliberal government policies encouraging indigenous people to act as corporations.

My thanks to David Graeber for this point.

Since one’s culture/identity is part of what makes one an effective corporate actor, laws and states must assist in protecting this asset.

Since I first wrote this sentence, the political import of this claim has shifted as the debate in anthropology has grown over the U.S. military’s efforts to hire anthropological assistance for their occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan.

See Nina Eliasoph’s ethnographic exploration of civil society in the United States, Avoiding Politics for a compelling analysis of how her interlocutors on the ground are affected by their sociological imagination (or lack there of).

For an elegant comparison of the anthropologist’s anthropological imagination with their interlocutor’s social imagination, see Astuti 2000.

My emphasis on epistemologies is in part responding to Barth’s call to anthropologists to pay attention to knowledge and knowledge circulation (Barth 2002).

While I have not yet come across critics of neoliberalism who discuss the sociological
imagination, a number comment on the “personal as political” perspective. See in particular Cruikshank 1999 and Rose 1996.

26 It is the act of writing social analysis that can lead people to suspect that the two forms of engagement with the world can be separated.

27 My thanks to Amy Cohen for bringing this passage to my attention.

28 See Gershon 2006 for an ethnographic account of people who are explicit about having a culture, and yet do not treat having a culture as optional or a possession.

29 This point comes out of separate conversations with Karen Sykes and Mikael Karlstrom who both suggested that morality is where anthropology should turn.

30 See Goodman [in press] for an ethnographically rich example of how social organization undercuts neoliberalism.

31 I am not suggesting that anthropologists embrace culture wholeheartedly, I am not writing out of such despondent nostalgia. Rather, I am suggesting that we retain the liberating move that the culture concept contained, and continue to make visible the value of the different epistemological stances people on the ground turn to when they wish to speak against neoliberalism.

32 See Brown 2006 for a published version of the talk.