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For gesture researchers outside anthropology, the promise--and challenge--of anthropological method stems from one or more of its core commitments: its pursuit of human variation, both diachronic and synchronic; its insistence on naturalistic rather than experimental research design; and its integrative sensibility that studies human behavior in an expansive sociocultural "context." This last sensibility may even lead some to try to chase down the "total gestural fact," to twist a term of Marcel Mauss. Mauss famously saw gift exchange as a nexus—a "total social fact"—in which "all kinds of institutions are given expression at one and the same time."

But as we imagine what an "anthropology of gesture" can offer the wealth of gesture literature based largely in linguistics and cognitive science, we should pause and reflect critically on the fitful history of gesture in this field. I begin by revisiting two notable—but neglected—anthropological voices from twentieth-century gesture research in the United States: David Efron, a student of Franz Boas, who conducted an imaginative, fine-grained study of gesture variation in New York City; and Ray Birdwhistell, whose ambitious postwar science of "kinesics" teamed film-based microanalysis with American structuralism.

Efron and Birdwhistell saw gesture very differently. At stake in their work, and ours, is the fundamental problem of how and with what effects a science of gesture delimits its object of knowledge. What anthropologies of gesture are opened up and foreclosed when we delimit gesture one way rather than another? If "anthropology" is to mean more than simply comparison and group-relative variation; if it is to mean a richly contextualized perspective on gestural semiotics, then what would such an anthropology require? Must we return, in effect, to an old sense of "gesture" that refused to separate out articulators like the hands and thought of gesture configurationally as 'bearing' and 'comportment'? If, instead, we insist on the rigorous empirical study of handshape and movement pattern, through what additional, mediational concepts and methods can gesture become a window onto sociocultural life if not a total gestural fact?