

## A PORTRAIT OF ANTHROPOLOGY AS A YOUNG DISCIPLINE

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*The part of these conditions in which we are most interested is what we call a crisis of representation. This is the intellectual stimulus for the contemporary vitality of experimental writing in anthropology. The crisis arises from uncertainty about inadequate means of describing social reality.*

(Marcus and Fischer, 1983)

Anthropology is an evolving animal. It is also an uncertain and uneasy animal; as a discipline it is unparalleled in its reflexivity and mutability. Anthropologists continually, if not obsessively, reevaluate their own methods and theories. They are in many ways disillusioned perfectionists, climbers climbing determinably to the top of an academic mountain they already understand has no peak. "There can never be a final, accurate representation of what was meant or said, Denzin (in Sage 1997) declares, only different textual representations of different experiences (5). At the heart of the anthropological endeavor, then, is what I have termed an determined indeterminacy, or what Marcus and Fischer have perhaps unfairly labeled a feeling of inadequacy, which supplies us with an insistent question, or rather, an insistent *set* of questions about the *processes* and *products* of anthropology's most important contribution to the social sciences, ethnography. Attempts at answering, or at least addressing these questions have led ethnographic writers down a number of conceptual and rhetorical paths, some of them literary or humanistic, others scientific, but the majority of them remarkably dissimilar and incongruous.

Some of the questions that trouble the discipline are as follows: 1) How does one proceed to *write* a person, or a people, or an experience? 2) What are the best textual strategies and/or discursive modes an ethnographer might employ? 3) Should ethnographic writers frame their experiences in story? 4) Should ethnographers put themselves into the ethnography, or remove themselves? 5) Should they aspire to conditions of scientific objectivity and strict realism, or should they embrace subjectivity? 6) Should ethnogra-

phers reflect upon their own experiences? 7) What ultimately makes one ethnography better than another? Denzin identifies an even more destabilizing set: Who is the subject? Does the subject have direct access to his or her lived experiences? Is there a layer of lived experience as good as any other? Are the subjects' formulations always most accurate?

In his essay, *Lessons James Joyce Teaches Us*, on which we will touch later, Denzin begins to turn over the very logic of ethnographic writing. According to Denzin, the very idea that experience can be translated into text is couched in a hardly identifiable ideological framework with which we are wholly and undeniably married. Denzin challenges this framework by declaring simply that language and speech do not mirror experience.

Vincent Crapanzano (1980:xiv), in the preface to his seminal work, Tuhami: Portrait of a Moroccan, articulates a similar but less radical desire for change and reflection: Anthropology should, I believe, lead us to question, not to confirm, our own presumptions. In Tuhami, Crapanzano isn't looking for answers so much as he's looking for the right questions, or the better questions, or where and what to question next. Accordingly, Tuhami is widely regarded as an extraordinarily successful ethnographic experiment. I am inclined to agree with Denzin and Crapanzano, as are others. Anthropologists have not achieved representative perfection, they cannot, but experimentation will lead us ever closer to this unreachable ideal. Therefore, contemporary anthropologists have embraced their disciplinary insecurities in (un)similar manners. In fact, Marcus and Fischer regard most or all of Contemporary ethnography, the locus of intellectual energy in anthropology, as experimentation, a fragmented diversity that no longer organizes itself by way of unifying paradigms. Today ethnographies are by nature eclectic, each one a change-up pitch that is disassociated and unstable in relation to the (imagined) disciplinary whole.

I cannot, in such limited space, make an honest attempt to answer the reflexive questions with which current ethnography wrestles. Perhaps there are no answers, or, new renditions of ethnography are our best tries at those answers. For the same reasons, I cannot properly or completely detail the history of this anthropological movement, that is, the crisis of representation ethnographers face this is precisely what Marcus and Fischer have attempted in Anthropology as Cultural Critique: an Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences. Rather, I'm interested in the way anthropology has become more *literary*. While I do not think that borrowed concepts from literary criticism have been the exclusive *catalysts* for change, they have certainly played a major part in the current reaction or crisis in ethnography. After all, the crisis is one of representation; anthropologists are unsure of how to write, or *translate*, their field experiences, field research, and field notes into an eth-

nography that faithfully relates all of these things at once. Because of this, Marcus and Fischer (1986:10) have proclaimed that today is a period rich with experimentation and conceptual risk-taking. Literary interests have helped anthropology intellectually diverge as a discipline.

My focus, then, is not so much on the actual descriptive techniques that have populated ethnographic texts so much as the intellectual (as opposed to historical) circumstances surrounding such a change. Anthropology as Cultural Critique, however, has become my Bible during this search; it has lead me to examine a great number of wonderful ethnographies, offered wisdom and complicated criticism, and, of course, an outstanding chronology of the *crisis*. Because of this, a short examination of the book is in order.

Marcus and Fischer have divided their history of the crisis into three parts. In the first, they make an organized effort to classify the new strategies of *interpretive* ethnography that have surfaced in the movement toward a more faithful, deeper representation of the Other. In the second, central portion Of their work they examine political economy experiments in ethnographic writing. They recognize these texts, interestingly enough, as usually well within the conventions of realist writing (108). Finally, the authors look at the importance of cultural critique, the practice of gathering ethnographic data not only for interpretation, but cross-cultural comparison, especially between the subject and the anthropologist's own cultures. Marcus and Fischer emphasize the ways in which such critique offers us new perspectives, helping us to disturb Y [our own] cultural self-satisfaction (157). For them, cultural critique is the highest form of ethnographic writing, combining both description and analysis to produce a comprehensive brand of insight. However, the promise of anthropology as a compelling form of cultural critique, comprehensively and cross-culturally addressing issues of gender, power, family, etc., has remained largely unfulfilled (111).

I am interested primarily in the rise of interpretive texts, which focus on the anthropology of experience. This, importantly, is where the literary Minded ethnographer of the *avant garde* has found his or her niche. Current interpretive ethnographies have consistently invented (or borrowed from other disciplines) new ways of capturing difference, whereas many political economy texts employ older anthropological forms of discourse. This is not to say, however, that experiments in writing are exclusively focused on the representation of experience. Marcus and Fischer have pointed out that many excellent experimental pieces have bteullixes of both global and mort personal, experiential concerns (see Obeyesereke 1981, Rosaldo 1980, Shostak 1981).

As I mentioned before, Marcus and Fischer make an effort to organize the different directions in which interpretive ethnography has diverged. Some

of the classifications they recognize, for example, are psychodynamic texts (see Levy 1973, Kracke 1978, Obeyesereke 1981), A life history texts (see Crapanzano 1980, Shostak 1981), life cycle texts (see Rosaldo 1980), texts oriented around ritual (see Schieffelin 1976, Katz et al 1999), texts organized around a dramatic event (see Shore 1982, Geertz 1973), and texts organized around aesthetic aspects of a culture (see Chernoff 1979). Also recognized are what the authors call modernist texts, which address several important issues of representation by deploying strategies that limit or share authority (by dialogic and collaborative means), and hold the conventional use of the concept of culture itself in question (68, see Crapanzano 1980). While these may have been the most radical of texts for Marcus and Fischer, most interpretive ethnography of the late 90's and today probably fall within this classification. In tune with these radical texts are other semi-literary experiments that waver on the line between ethnography and other, more fictive modes. In this category fall ethno poetics, ethnographic fiction, and ethnographic film and documentary.

Several of these works exemplify what I have begun to recognize as the critical mentality of new literary-minded ethnography. These ethnographies all concern themselves with the complex task of representing *experience* and *personhood*, cultural intangibles that older techniques are woefully unable to process. The ethnographic relationships between experience and experiment are not accidental; the difficulty of rendering the former has prompted the latter. In fact, I am inclined to view such literary experimentation in ethnography as *coping* mechanisms or strategies. Inventing or borrowing new forms of discourse and new textual strategies are the interpretive and experiential ethnographer's way of dealing with the infinite complexities of translating experiences, stories, and the minutiae of social reality into readable accounts. They are moves towards a more sophisticated form of anthropological writing.

I recognize this movement towards more sophisticated *literary* forms as motivated by two opposing desires. First, ethnographers desire *interesting* accounts. This is not to say that ethnographers experiment or write for superficial reasons; appealing (a *subjective* measurement, by the way) accounts are often the most reflective, the most descriptive, and certainly more technique oriented. Such a desire, though, is in danger of interfering with the more powerful motivating desire of authenticity. Authenticity is the anthropological term for truth. However, it is in every way a condition of the ethnography. You might say that the tip of the metaphoric mountain, which I described earlier, is the perfect state of ethnographic authenticity. Again I must stress the impossibility of reaching this condition. A completely authentic text is the pipe dream of anthropology, an elixir of life that is for anthropol-

ogy what the formula for total prediction was for early century physicists. Nevertheless, we aspire to such an ideal textual condition.

If we look at older paradigms of anthropological method, theory, and writing, we can single out the strategies by which the ethnographer hoped to reach a state of authenticity in his or her account. At the time, authentic meant empirical, or scientific. Science was an objective institution, a practice that commenced only under certain recognizable and controllable experimental conditions. Therefore, anthropologists aspired to objective modes of observation and interpretation. Moreover, attempts at refining ethnographic representation centered on inventing new methods and new theories. This led to important innovations in anthropology, perhaps the greatest being the institution of participant observation.

Rather than listing the many and certainly complex historical reasons for theoretical (as opposed to methodological, which I believe today remains more or less ratified) shifts, what I find more cogent are the intellectual changes that mark the movement towards more authentic, readable accounts of social reality. This certainly had to do with the failings of previous ethnographers to textualize experience, or other microscopic aspects of social reality. Perhaps the reason for our shift towards an increased interest in detail and experience was prompted by our abandoning of grand theoretical ways of thinking; at the time textual experiments became commonplace, theoretical issues had become less and less frequently the issue. Younger ethnographers, I believe, recognized finally that the problems plaguing the conceptual platform(s) of ethnography were largely textual.

A similar realization had already occurred within literary circles at the beginning of this century. "Avant garde writers like James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, and later, Calvino, Borges, and Bish, have all recognized the inherent fallibility of language, of the alphabet, or the notion of the text as physical artifact. The idea of *text* for these authors had eventually become flawed, only capable of so much, or perhaps even capable of very little. In fact, Denzin (in Sage 1997: 21-23) argues that James Joyce's 36 year literary career, composed of four major works (Dubliners in 1914, Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man in 1916, Ulysses in 1922, and Finnegans Wake in 1939) mirrors the evolution of ethnography, a movement which spans from hard-core, traditional-realist ethnography (21) to subjective, auto ethnography (21), and then to interpretive, high-modernist, stream of consciousness, first-person ethnography (22), and, finally, to an unreadable journey into language and its mysteries, respectively. As an aspiring ethnographer who has read these works (except of course, the nightmare that is Finnegans Wake), I agree wholly with this remarkable observation; Denzin is wonderfully accurate. Joyce's textual movements do indeed follow the major literary developments of ethnogra-

phy, and together represent a virtual army of radical literary strategies ranging from parallax to mobile consciousness, that have each been, almost chronologically parallel to Joyce's career, incorporated into ethnographic writing styles.

Each of Joyce's works have been a reaction to the former, until he finally outwrote himself in *Finnegans Wake*, a supercomplex, paralogical, and rhizomatic (23) monster of choppy, alien prose, bizarre word games, and linguistic duplicity. Denzin tells us that it is unreadable because *it has never been written before*. He recognizes, moreover, that in the same way Joyce has intellectually matured, anthropology has and is maturing:

*The fifth moment is the present, defined and shaped by the crises described previously. We are writing our way out o/writing culture and into the still undefined Sixth Moment.*

( 18, emphasis mine)

As outlined in similar histories of intellectual maturation in ethnography (see Geertz's *Blurred Genres* 1975 and *Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture* 1973, Bruner's *Ethnography as Narrative* 1981, and Rosaldo's *Culture and Truth* 1989), the move towards total authenticity is beginning to reach beyond the capabilities of academic text, and perhaps anthropologists will even out write themselves as Joyce has. Whatever the outcome, new textual strategies, or rather, new textual *aesthetics* will necessarily be invented, again, to *cope* with the complexity of translating experience into a readable artifact. This, remember, is ultimately the reason for the marriage between experiential ethnography and literary experimentation the need for sophistication, the desire for authenticity.

This brings us back to the mountain, my bastardization of the word evolution, and the animal of anthropology. That we have a goal in cultural anthropology is clear. We have made movements, presumably to higher intellectual grounds, by reflexivity, reactivity, and reevaluation. Our sophistication, which is really just a term that signifies our desire for comprehensive authenticity, has occurred in stages. This maturation is evident in our ethnographies *Life and Death on Mount Everest*, for example, is a far superior rendering of cultural values, aesthetics, rituals, and characters because of its sensitivity and delicacy of language that the *Golden Bough* as well as in our ethnographic histories. Geertz (1973,1975), Bruner (1981), Rosaldo (1989), Denzin (1997), and others have each pointed towards future forms of ethnography, each more aware and able to handle complexity than the last. The movement is marked by a desire to textualize reality, to achieve a complex

model of rendering cultural experience that is so precise that it satisfies our unreachable standards of authenticity. Because we have begun, perhaps incorrectly, to think of culture as a text (Geertz 1973), we have postulated a perfect translation from the language of experience to the rhetoric of anthropological discourse. The most radical and contemporary of ethnographers dispute even this, arguing that our notions of text and language hinder our translations, and couch our mission in terminology that does not fairly apply to ethnography. The only certain thing is that we are uncertain. Probably Joyce never believed that he had reached what he set out to achieve. After all, where conventional fictions provide a light, uncomplicated meal to their readers, reading *Finnegans Wake* is like stuffing your mouth with cubes of chicken bullion. It is both a triumph and a failure, and by all human standards simply *too much*. In closing, then, take a diary entry of Joyce's famous alter ego and protagonist in *A Portrait*, *Ulysses*, and *Finnegans Wake*, the aspiring writer Stephen Dedalus:

*26 April:* Mother is putting my new secondhand clothes in order. She prays now, she says, that I may learn in my own life and away from home and friends what the heart is and what it feels. Amen. So be it. Welcome, **a** life! I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race.

(*A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, 1977: 253)

Our plight as anthropologists is much the same as Stephen's. Nevertheless, and along with the several ethnographic "historians" I have mentioned, I have tried to put anthropology's second-hand clothes in order. I also welcome with a determined indeterminacy the prospect of forging a new reality of experience.

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