Writing Culture
The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography
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Stephen Tyler in the Field. Photography by Martha G. Tyler.

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Afterword: Ethnographic Writing and Anthropological Careers

If you want to understand what a science is, you should look in the first instance not at its theories or its findings, and certainly not at what its apologists say about it; you should look at what the practitioners of it do.

CLIFFORD GEERTZ. The Interpretation of Cultures

The task of the Santa Fe seminar from which these essays emerged was to introduce a literary consciousness to ethnographic practice by showing various ways in which ethnographies can be read and written. What we have said about the enterprise of representing society and culture would not be news in the complex debates of contemporary literary theory, one major thrust of which has been to transform literary criticism into a more encompassing cultural criticism. Fortunately, we did not have to enter too far into the thickness of these often convoluted and technical debates to have a therapeutic effect on anthropological practitioners of ethnography. They are more self-conscious than ever before that they are writers who, as maturing professionals, routinely outgrow the models of ethnography by which they were inducted into anthropology.

The question for the anthropologist is, then, how consequential this literary therapy should be—does it merely add a new critical appreciation of ethnography, which one can take or leave in reading and writing ethnographic accounts, or does it clear the way for reconceptualizing anthropological careers and valorizing innovations in strategies for projects that link fieldwork and writing? History, for example, has long had an internal discourse (the specialty of historiography) that has viewed its method as writing, and a number of recent works (most prominently, White 1973) have sought to give this discourse a distinctly literary cast, as we have tried to do here for a consideration of ethnography. However, the potentially radical influence such liter-
orality and only makes the transition to writing with difficulty. Much of the critique of dominant conventions of ethnographic realism, as well as alternatives to them, thus arises from reflections on the origins of anthropological knowledge in this primary process of textualization. The ethnographic task as one of inscription, strategies of representing dialogue in ethnographic accounts, and objections to the notion of representation itself were issues that recurred throughout the seminar discussions, especially as they were formulated in the papers by Clifford and Tyler.

The anthropological dissertation, typically a straightforward analytical and descriptive account from fieldwork, is the ethnography that most anthropologists must write. Since the granting of professional credentials has depended on its evaluation, it has tended to be a conservative exercise. It is in turning the dissertation into a published monograph or series of articles that career directions are determined on a number of levels. For one thing, reputations and tenure depend on writing beyond the dissertation. On a more personal level of intellectual development, the transformation of the dissertation, and the textualized field materials on which it is based, into other written versions embodies a reaction to the teaching model of ethnographic practice. In this transformation, one is freer to take risks and also more subject to intertextuality—that is, writing under the influence of, and with the desire to influence, other writers. Among recent generations of anthropologists, the new "classics," particular ethnographies that come to be received as tokens of an idealized image of what the practice of anthropology should exemplify, derive primarily from writing in reaction to the initiatory training experience.

Affected by the general intellectual mood of the period in which it occurs, the initial experience of producing an account for professional qualification can be personally confirmed, quietly modified, strenuously criticized, or even rejected in the varied outcomes of attempts to rewrite the conservative teaching model of ethnography. The general mood now being reflexive and self-critical, dissertation conventions are perhaps less conservative, but the legitimate array of options in the production of published accounts is also more extensive. Producing an ethnographic account from fieldwork may still occupy its seminal role in inaugurating careers and creating a certain ideological community of shared experience among anthropologists, but it can no longer be so easily understood simply as the definitive model of craft to be repeated in a career of research. In many careers, the kind of text one produces, or fails to produce, following the dissertation is formative of the future writing projects one undertakes. Often as not these depart in interesting ways from dissertation eth-
nography, especially in the textual uses made of the corpus of field material.

It has probably always been the case that the initial experience of ethnographic writing has been constitutional and experimental in the context of research careers, even among the pioneering exemplars of modern ethnographic practice, such as Malinowski, Evans-Pritchard, and Firth, and certainly for succeeding generations of anthropologists who have continued to regard certain of the former’s texts canonically. However, the ethnography forged from a post-dissertation attempt to rewrite material by putting a more personal stamp on it is in many careers a one-of-a-kind phenomenon rather than a standard product. Some distinguished careers have been made by the continual rewriting of original field materials, and it is a common observation that when anthropologists start a second project and thus begin anew, they are rarely able to achieve the freshness and intensity of the projects that inaugurated their careers. Often, the most interesting writers in anthropology are those who, while continuing to invoke ethnographic authority and to work through ethnographic detail in their writing, never try to reproduce the kind of text that they wrote in response to training, but rather attempt to explore lessons gained from that experience, which requires different forms and styles of exposition.

A certain image of the ethnography is powerfully inculcated by initiatory research training and articulated in a professional socializing discourse that speaks around its subject rather than to it (you only know a good ethnography when you read one, despite the widespread sense that there are standards). Consequently, the actual diversity and patterning of anthropological careers as to their textual products have been obscured and largely unexamined. The work of the seminar was to unfix, by literary therapy, the narrow frames in which ethnographies have typically been read. This has been by no means a hermetic or naïve enterprise, as some may fear, since the concern of much contemporary literary criticism is to expose the historical and political contexts of writing—precisely the dimensions ethnography of an interpretive bent has long been criticized for eliding or skirting. But, beyond this critical function, our questioning of the particular modes of realist description in contemporary anthropology conditions the writing strategies of anthropologists who continue to look primarily to the ethnographic tradition for both limits and possibilities. By criticism of the terms in which ethnography has been received and by alternative readings of exemplary works, we have tried to expose possibilities in past ethnographic writing that make it relevant to the current spirit of experimentation.