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# Presence and Representation: The Other and Anthropological Writing

Johannes Fabian

In discussions of the Orient, the Orient is all absence, whereas one feels the Orientalist and what he says as presence; yet we must not forget that the Orientalist's presence is enabled by the Orient's effective absence.

—EDWARD W. SAID, *Orientalism*

## *Representations and Presence*

It is not without significance that in anthropological and sociological usage *representation* most often appears in the plural. The singular would put the emphasis on representation as an activity or process. Instead, by privileging the plural, we invoke entities, products of knowledge or culture. That this is not merely a matter of practicality—of devising terms that best fit the analytical tasks to which we put them—will, I hope, become clear from the reflections that follow.

Taken as a philosophical issue, the idea of representation implies the prior assumption of a *difference* between reality and its “doubles.”

This essay was developed from a contribution to a panel on “Othering: Representations and Realities,” organized by Smadar Lavie, Kirin Narayan, and Renato Rosaldo for the 85th Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association in Philadelphia, December 1986.

In an earlier version, I wrote at this point: “I want to thank my friend and colleague Bob Scholte for his untiring readiness to be a partner in discussions and to share his knowledge of the literature.” I now dedicate this essay to his memory.

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Things are paired with images, concepts, or symbols, acts with rules and norms, events with structures. Traditionally, the problem with representations has been their "accuracy," the degree of fit between reality and its reproductions in the mind. When philosophers lost the hope of ever determining accuracy (and thus attaining Truth), they found consolation in the test of usefulness: a good representation is one that works. The proof of its working is that it enables us to act on the world together.<sup>1</sup> In such a frame, science, including anthropology, is conceived as the pursuit of privileged representations, privileged in that, by their nature or by their combination, they establish knowledge of a special kind. In the case of anthropology, "culture" has served as a sort of umbrella concept for representations. The structuralists have been most explicit about the need to think of representation in the plural, but their position is shared, in varying degrees, by all those who conceive of (cultural) knowledge as the selection and combination of signs in systems, patterns, or structures, in short, as some kind of conceptual order ruling perceptual chaos.

The postulate of a difference between reality and its doubles generates another assumption of difference, or rather, *distance*: that between the knower and the known. This comes naturally, as it were, with conceiving of the (scientific-philosophical) knower as a viewer and observer. It is reinforced by the idea that to know scientifically is to interpose a system of concepts (a method or a logic) between reality and

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1. Remember the connection between the Kantian quest for synthetic forms and Émile Durkheim's idea of collective representations sustained by the moral authority of a society. Durkheim certainly was one to look for the "ethic" in the "ethnic"-primitive, and it makes me wonder whether Stephen A. Tyler's characterization of postmodern ethnography as a return to "an earlier and more powerful notion of the ethical character of all discourse, as captured in the ancient significance of the family of terms 'ethos,' 'ethnos,' 'ethics'" might not signal a return to the Durkheimian fold (Tyler, "Post-Modern Ethnography: From Document of the Occult to Occult Document," in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus [Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1986], p. 126).

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the mind. If I had to specify anthropology's special contribution to debates about the nature of knowledge, I would say that reflecting on the nature of ethnography has led us to abandon naive faith in distance. One form this realization may take is to reject the givenness of the Other as the object of our discipline. Awkward and faddish as it may sound, othering expresses the insight that the Other is never simply given, never just found or encountered, but *made*. For me, investigations into othering are investigations into the production of anthropology's object. In *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (1983), I tried to show connections between representation as an idea central to various kinds of semiotic and symbolic approaches and the creation of distance. I have developed the argument against "representationism" (not to be confused with a theory of representation) more fully in my later essay, "Culture, Time, and the Other" (1985).<sup>2</sup> Of course, our malaise regarding distancing as both a prerequisite and a possibly autodestructive device in anthropological writing needs to be explored and argued further. In this paper I attack representation, but I urge readers also to see Marilyn Strathern's thoughtful defense of representation in a review of Vincent Crapanzano's *Waiting: The Whites of South Africa*.<sup>3</sup> Strathern argues a point that is also formulated succinctly by Jean-Paul Dumont:

The others are not any more present in the text the anthropologist offers to her readers than their voices are present in (or even behind) the phonetic transcription of their utterances. In fact, it is because of this, because of this phonic and existential absence that these others can in the end be represented by the anthropologist, for, if they were here, there would be no point in representing them, that is, to stand for them and to speak for them.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps it is possible to continue the debate (without simply excluding convinced "representationists") if one locates the problem with representations not in a difference between reality and its images but in a tension between re-presentation and *presence*. First of all, this would help to revindicate the primacy of experience as something that requires presence (as sharing of time and place). Second, it would stress the processual and productive nature of representation, not in the weak sense of the term in which *process* can signify any activity or sequence

2. See Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York, 1983) and "Culture, Time, and the Object of Anthropology," *Berkshire Review* 20 (1985): 7-23.

3. Marilyn Strathern, "Intervening," review of *Waiting: The Whites of South Africa*, by Vincent Crapanzano, *Cultural Anthropology* 2 (May 1987): 255-67.

4. Jean-Paul Dumont, "Prologue to Ethnography or Prolegomena to Anthropography," *Ethos* 14 (Dec. 1986): 359.

occurring in time and *production* anything that precedes what one chooses to take as a result or outcome, but in the strong sense of transforming, fashioning, and creating.<sup>5</sup> In other words, we anthropologists should perhaps not think of representation in the first place as some enabling capacity of the human mind (although investigations of such a capacity remain legitimate for psychologists, brain scientists, and philosophers) but, more modestly, as something that we actually do, as our praxis. This would help us to realize that our ways of making the Other are ways of making ourselves. The need to go *there* (to exotic places, be they far away or around the corner) is really our desire to be *here* (to find or defend our position in the world). The urge to write ethnography is about making the *then* into a *now*. In this move from then to now the making of knowledge out of experience occurs. Both movements, from here to there and from then to now, converge in what I called presence. This is the way I would define the process of othering.

I may be accused of spreading confusion when, in one place, I oppose representation to praxis, and then talk about representation as praxis, or the praxis of representation, and so forth. I am afraid I know of no less ambiguous way of talking about the issue that, in my mind, is “representationism”—roughly the philosophical stance, together with its hegemonical claims, which also is the object of Richard Rorty’s critique (and not only his; I only cite him as a convenient example).<sup>6</sup> The aim is to assign to representing a more modest, less imperial, place in a theory of knowledge, not to exorcise by decree what is obviously an important human capacity.<sup>7</sup> Incidentally, if representation has to do above all with power, then it may not only be thought of as praxis but it is praxis. All the attempts to make it unassailable by declaring it essentially theoretical would then be so many practical moves designed to preserve its hegemony.

If representation is thought of above all as praxis, this has two consequences: (1) The foremost problem with it will not primarily be accurate reproduction of realities but—how shall we call it?—repetition, reenactment. (2) Representations (in the plural) will then be

5. Dean MacCannell and Juliet Flower MacCannell’s *Time of the Sign: A Semiotic Interpretation of Modern Culture* (Bloomington, Ind., 1982) is an intelligent and thoughtful recent defense of representation (as semiosis). Their proposal to redefine semiotics as “the study of the *means of the production of meaning*” moves them closer to a conception of representation as praxis (MacCannell and MacCannell, *The Time of the Sign*, p. 9). But not close enough, since they are not ready to abandon the idea that semiotics (legitimately) occupies a central, privileged position in their theory of knowledge.

6. See Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, N.J., 1979).

7. And an important aspect of all scientific practice. See *Human Studies: A Journal for Philosophy and the Social Sciences* 11 (Apr./July 1988), a special issue, “Representation in Scientific Practice,” ed. Michael Lynch and Steve Woolgar.

considered as acts or sequences of acts, in short, as performances. Performances need actors and audiences, writers and readers. Therefore, representations ought to draw their convincingness primarily from communication, rhetoric, and persuasion, and only secondarily from systemic fits or logical proofs. The logic of symbols, to name a conceptualization of knowledge much in favor among anthropologists, is much more a matter of Socratic persuasion in conversation than of Platonic appeal to transcendent truths.

### *Representation and the Strange Story of "Ethnography"*

Before I return to othering I shall permit myself a slight digression. I may have to stand corrected, but it is my impression that recent awareness of textuality, authorship, style, and so forth has not gone very far in critically examining our seemingly mindless, but actually quite revealing, ways with the word *ethnography*.

Ignorance of Greek may have helped, but it is hardly the only explanation for general insensibility to terminological misfits such as "ethnographic writing." At best it is an awkward pleonasm (because *writing* is already contained in the Greek *graphein*); at worst it signals a shift to a merely indexical use of the qualifier "ethnographic." It doesn't mean a thing; it just indicates the place of a kind of writing in a taxonomy of writing. But that is not the whole story. Without feeling much discomfort we also use expressions such as "ethnographic collections/exhibits/museums" (which are institutions that neither write nor usually exhibit writings). And what about "ethnographic observation," "ethnographic data," and "ethnographic subjects"? Easy, one may respond, these are observations, data, and subjects written about in the manner of ethnography. While they are less than elegant, these expressions ought not to be more offensive than such accepted compounds as an "ethnographic publication" or an "ethnographic authority."

At any rate, it might be argued further, we can avoid the semantic tangle if we simply accept as a fact that in current technical usage *ethnography* and *ethnographic* take their meaning in contrast to *theory* and *theoretical*, roughly in the manner our French colleagues have come to oppose *ethnography* to *ethnology*. So we seem to have returned to a purely indexical or classificatory function of the term. Perhaps, but the layman who picks up a book or visits an exhibition designated as *ethnographic* may be ignorant of disciplinary classifications; his attention is attracted by the lure of connotations—*ethnographic* evokes the exotic. In more prudish times it promised (and delivered) bare bosoms and frightening fetishes; today it satisfies a new aesthetic of the fantastic and imaginary among some, and the need for "inside knowledge" of the third world among others. As Roland Barthes has observed, the signified of conno-

tation is "at once general, global and diffuse; it is, if you like, a fragment of ideology."<sup>8</sup> Whenever in the use of "technical" terms the balances of signification tip heavily on the side of connotation, ideology, obfuscation, and plain intellectual fraud loom large, whereby the blame is first of all ours, not the layman's.

But we can do more than cast suspicion. Without pretending to do what should be the work of a careful conceptual history (in several languages), we can state that the term *ethnography* acquired its present free-floating character as a result of certain disjunctions that still pose problems and are the reasons why we worry about the meaning of the term in the first place. Summarily, these disjunctions can be stated as follows:

1) Assuming that the term *ethnography* was coined following models such as *cosmography* or *geography*, its "innocent" meaning would simply be "description of peoples."<sup>9</sup> Except that by the time the word was coined, *ethnoi* had long since lost its innocence as a neutral term and taken on an evaluative notion (somewhat like the Latin *gentes*, which, to put it mildly, meant "non-Christians" at the height of the Middle Ages). More important, the element of de-scription, writing about, had from the beginning a nominal slant, suggestive less of the activity of writing than of its products: descriptions, tableaux, in short, representations.

2) When, at a much later time, description of peoples became a professional activity, when field research became an accepted and even required practice, the disjunction of ethnography from writing was so advanced that one could, without flinching, designate observation on the spot as "doing ethnography." Bronislaw Malinowski, the man on the spot, was considered an ethnographer; Sir James George Frazer, the writer in his armchair, not really. Yet Malinowski, as James A. Boon

8. Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero and Elements of Semiology*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (Boston, 1970), p. 91.

9. A quick check of a few dictionaries confirms this. *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 3d ed., 2 vols. (Oxford, 1975) dates the introduction of the term *ethnography* in 1834 and defines it as "the scientific description of nations or races of men, their customs, habits, and differences" (s.v. "ethnography," 1:685). *Ethnology* appears in 1842 and is "the science which treats of races and peoples, their relations, their distinctive characteristics, etc." (s.v. "ethnology," 1:685-86). The compiler's difficulty in distinguishing between -graphy and -logy is obvious. The use of *etc.* suggests that he abandoned the quest for a precise statement. In a modern French dictionary, *Lexis-Larousse: Dictionnaire de la langue française* (Paris, 1975), *ethnographie* is dated in 1823 and defined as "étude descriptive des ethnies" (s.v. "ethnographie," p. 655). Notice that while this formula designates an activity, the reference to writing is found in an adjective modifying *study*. *Ethnologie* appeared a decade later (1834) and is described as "science qui a pour objet l'étude des caractères ethniques, en vue de dégager des lois générales des sociétés humaines" (s.v. "ethnologie," *ibid.*).

reminds us, emulated Frazer's writing in his early ethnographies (before he became scientific and boring).<sup>10</sup>

3) The disjunction between ethnography and writing has, of course, also been at the bottom of making a distinction between research and write-up that was masked as a mere sequence but was in fact a ritual dramatization of spatial distance between the sites of observation and the places of writing.

4) The process of disjunction had its apotheosis when professionalization of anthropology reached its peak (probably in the 1950s). Two things happened:

a) In common usage, ethnography had become synonymous with empirical research and data collection. As such, it was opposed to theory. This was expressed most openly in course requirements and reading assignments; it was, to my knowledge, not often discussed in the literature except in reviewers' complaints about too much or too little ethnography in a given publication. It also gave rise to a curious sort of double-talk: praise was heaped on "theory"; dissertation proposals and Ph.D. theses had no chance of passing if they were considered short of theory, yet the same judges could be caught nostalgically invoking the great ethnographies of the past.

b) However, accuracy demands that we note the appearance of an avant-garde of young American anthropologists in the fifties who registered discontent with this mindless devaluation of ethnography. They became the inventors of "new ethnography." The old opposition between theory and ethnography was abolished and ethnography itself was declared a theoretical enterprise. Great efforts went into attempts to provide ethnography with rules (such as in the "ethnography of speaking") and more formal and sophisticated methods (in the various kinds of ethnoscience).<sup>11</sup> The former branch of the movement—Dell Hymes and a few others—was eventually led to consider anthropological writing itself important, inevitably so, given the attention paid to texts, rhetoric, style, genres, and so forth. The ethnoscientists had put their bets on schemata, tables, and graphs, and algebraic representation. By the time they discovered that there is no way to get around

10. See James A. Boon, *Other Tribes, Other Scribes: Symbolic Anthropology in the Comparative Study of Cultures, Histories, Religions, and Texts* (Cambridge, 1982), pp. 9–21.

11. An example of this new attitude is Harold C. Conklin's entry for "Ethnography" in *The International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, 18 vols. (New York, 1968), 5:172–78, an important text given its task to formulate a succinct contemporary definition of the term. That the definition was a matter of a group defining what it does or thinks ought to be done can be seen if Conklin's statement is compared to the article that follows it, Harold E. Driver's "Ethnology" (in *ibid.*, 5:178–86). The difference is much less systematic than historical. Driver represents the view of a different generation.



texts, the discussion on ethnographic writing was already in full bloom, and “new ethnography” looked old. Nevertheless, I find in current writings about ethnographic writing a curious lack of acknowledgment of that “turn to language,” brought about by both ethnographers of communication and the ethnoscientists. It is to them, above all, that we owe our present critical position. Or, to put it somewhat differently, had we not been prepared by the “turn to language,” the reception of hermeneutics (Paul Ricoeur, Clifford Geertz), critical theory (Jürgen Habermas, for instance), and literary and historical “deconstructionism” would probably not have had the impact they have had.

5) From an outside point of view, which anthropology acquired under the influence of literary theory and criticism, the disjunction between ethnography and theory was not just a matter of assigning different hierarchical status to different sorts of activities (which could be taken as a sign of anthropology reaching maturity as a science). It was expressive of a differentiation of genres of writing or, as some observers have stated, of a generic crisis.

Whatever else this literary turn accomplished, it restored writing to its central position in debates about the nature of ethnography, and this occurred in more than one sense. It not only raised questions of authorship and literary form, which, after all, are concerns that do not transcend the confines of our own culture,<sup>12</sup> but it also revived critical thought about the role of literacy in relation to orality. The latter makes ethnography political. Othering, in my view, is cut short when awareness of the political dimension of writing remains limited to insights about the political character of aesthetic standards and rhetorical devices. In such critical discourse, anthropology’s Other is said to be dominated by ethnography. But to be dominated, it takes more than to be written *about*. To become a victim the Other must be written *at* (as in “shot at”) with literacy serving as a weapon of subjugation and discipline. Conversely, to stop writing about the Other will not bring liberation. But more about that later.<sup>13</sup>

### *Experiments with Genre: Symptom or Therapy?*

How do the changes that came about as a result of the so-called generic crisis—comprising, roughly, the demise of the monograph as

12. Limitation to such concerns is what can be held against Clifford Geertz’s latest, and again brilliant, work, *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author* (Stanford, Calif., 1988). It is a critique of anthropological writing in a voice that talks from, to, about, and perhaps around ethnography as a self-contained practice. For a similar critique (with many references to the recent debate about Geertz’s approach), see Bob Scholte, “The Charmed Circle of Geertz’s Hermeneutics: A Neo-Marxist Critique,” *Critique of Anthropology* 6 (Spring 1986): 5–15.

13. See also Fabian, “Dilemmas of Critical Anthropology” (forthcoming).

the model form, the softening of strictures regarding an "objective" and "realistic" prose style, the refusal to maintain a clear separation of systematic description and narrative account—affect representation? Is the generic crisis a phase *within* the representationist stance, a period of emerging new genres that will eventually replace the old ones as privileged representations of the Other? Should we therefore fear that what looks like a crisis is just a lot of noise made by anthropologists regrouping in their attempts to save their representer's privileges? Or does the generic crisis go far enough to become a crisis *of* representation, leading perhaps to a rejection of representation? In which case nonrepresentation, including its most radical form, not-writing, graphic silence, would have to be an inescapable consequence. I shall say something about not-writing in the next section, but first let me offer a few thoughts on the debate about genres.

One of the confusing aspects of the debate is a lack of precision in using the term *genre*. Perhaps this is salutary at this early stage; I find it obfuscating. In the course of its history the term has sometimes taken a singular, or adjectival, meaning (in such expressions as "genre painting," or "this is not his genre") but in the present critical discussion, I believe its primary use should be to signal differentiation within a domain of activity. If, for instance, ethnography qualifies as *a* genre, this can only mean that it is, without residue, subsumed under literature (and its other genres). This is a way to preempt whatever useful insights might be gained from looking at ethnography as literature. What else would be left over for the critic but to recommend good over bad writing? (Come to think of it, Geertz probably deserves credit for initiating the new literary awareness in anthropology not so much because he fraternized with literary critics but because he dared to write well and got away with it.)

The broadest claim made about the generic crisis has been epistemological. Experimenting with new kinds of writing took many different forms, but it has been said that their common background is a crisis of realism.<sup>14</sup> Inevitably, this has caused critics to express fears that to abandon realism may be tantamount to giving up on objectivity, which in turn would mean the end of anthropology as a science.<sup>15</sup> In my view, it is too early to sound a general alarm. Instead I would suggest the following line of argument: What was wrong with ethnographic realism (as a literary convention) was not its realism (as an epistemological stance) but the surreptitious substitution of the former for the latter. As a literary form, realism has been a mode of representation, complete with its various privileged representational devices. As such,

14. See Marcus and Dick Cushman, "Ethnographies as Texts," *Annual Review of Ethnography* 11 (1982): 25–69.

15. See, for example, Jonathan Friedman, "Prolegomena to The Adventures of Phallus in Blunderland: An anti-anti-discourse," *Culture and History* 1 (1987): 31–49.

realism has been a style of anthropological writing corresponding to a mirror-of-nature theory of knowledge. A kind of knowledge that is *really* created by conventions of writing claims to be the reflection of that which is *real*. Realism's often unspoken, and unwarranted, pretension has been that a reality—a practice of writing “realistic” ethnographies—be representative of *the* reality. The turn to genres could be regarded as a turn not to less but to more realism, if one avoids confusion between literary and philosophical realism.

That the issue is even more complicated may be taken from Steven Webster's recent critique of the ways in which ethnographic realism has been perhaps too easily linked to nineteenth-century literary realism.<sup>16</sup> This is not the place to comment on his remarks on George Marcus and Dick Cushman, and James Clifford. But I agree with the general direction of his argument, which is, if I understand him correctly, that ethnographic writing has been naively naturalist rather than realist. And I share his fears that a reification of genre, however critical and sophisticated it may be, may result in the degeneration of critical epistemological diagnosis into literary “therapy” of ethnography. Even more depressing is the prospect that the discovery of generic constraints in ethnography may have an effect analogous to that of, say, dependency theory in “explaining” relations between the first and third worlds. Having demonstrated the inescapable logic of oppression and exploitation, such a theory threatens to eternalize them (because it is more easily taken as a proof of superiority than as a program for change). Yes, generic constraints are at work when we write, but to discover them does not absolve us. Indeed, as Webster says, “the genre be damned.”<sup>17</sup>

In discussions about genres anthropology questions itself, not just incidentally but in principle; at issue is not just the style but the nature of what we are doing when we write. As I suggested before, this regards *praxis*, not just modes of representation. Anything that leads to considering the practical aspects of writing about the Other is in my view not less but more realistic. Furthermore, with this perspective we will also be led to ask how a praxis of writing relates to the praxis written about. That relation cannot be exhausted by mirroring because praxis is *doing*. Doing does not *mirror* anything and that alone is reason enough to discard naive realism.<sup>18</sup> Doing is acting on, making, transforming (giv-

16. See Steven Webster, “Realism and Reification in the Ethnographic Genre,” *Critique of Anthropology* 6 (Spring 1986): 39–62.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 59.

18. I fully agree with Tyler when he states that the problem with realism “is not . . . the complexity of the so-called object of observation, nor failure to apply sufficiently rigorous and replicable methods, nor even less the seeming intractability of the language of description. It is instead a failure of the whole visualist ideology of referential discourse, with its rhetoric of ‘describing,’ ‘comparing,’ ‘classifying,’ and ‘generalizing,’ and its presumption of representational signification” (Tyler, “Post-Modern Ethnography,” p. 130).

ing form to), not regrettably so or incidentally (as complaints about subjective distortions in writing would have it), but inevitably. Praxis as transformation is the condition of relations with the Other. Othering in the sense of "making the Other" is the way in which that particular form of intercultural relation called ethnography occurs, in real space and real time, not (to use Michel Foucault's expression) in the "tabular space" of prefabricated systems of representation.

If this perspective is adopted, it follows that genres deserve our attention not so much because they are helpful in inventorying and classifying kinds of writing (or even in locating anthropological writing in Western literature) but as a conceptual element in a theory of text production that is unified in the sense that it encompasses the "ethnographic text" and the texts of ethnographic writing. A gap in the generic debate, indicating in my view a direction to be explored with profit, is a failure to recognize that some anthropologists began to think about genres in an attempt to understand text production "on the ground." At issue was not the shape of the final, published product but the form of (mostly) oral accounts on which such products must be built if they are to be ethnography: texts as a record of communicative events.<sup>19</sup>

I now want to take up briefly two issues that have played a prominent part in recent genre debates: dialogic and poetic modes of writing.

Dialogue, perceived vaguely as an alternative to isolating or dominating monologue, has been *en vogue* more than once during this century. It was part of what one might call soft existentialism (Martin Buber comes to mind) and part of hard critical theory (Habermas); it really became fashionable as various "encounter" doctrines swept the globe, and it never fails to serve as a device of obfuscation in the mouths of politicians. Anthropologists began to think seriously about dialogue at a time when, in general usage, the term had reached a low in signification. It had acquired a nonspecific ethical bonhomie, oozing good will, apparently lacking any cutting edge that would be required for critical work. Who could be against dialogue? This has tended to obscure the fact (for some outside critics, perhaps even for some of the proponents some of the time) that dialogue was first introduced not to signal an ethical attitude, much less a literary form, but to serve as a

19. See my own attempts in "Genres in an Emerging Tradition: An Approach to Religious Communication," in *Changing Perspectives in the Scientific Study of Religion*, ed. Allan W. Eister (New York, 1974), pp. 249-72, with acknowledgments to Dell Hymes, Dan Ben Amos, and others, and a more generalized application in a study of colonial language description, *Language and Colonial Power: The Appropriation of Swahili in the Former Belgian Congo, 1880-1938* (Cambridge, 1986). Incidentally, anthropologists concerned with this issue will profit much from watching recent developments in African history, or historiography: see Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison, Wis., 1985), and *African Historiographies: What History for Which Africa?* ed. Bogumil Jewsiewicki and David Newbury, Sage Series on African Modernization and Development, vol. 12 (Beverly Hills, Calif., 1986).

reflection about the nature of anthropological fieldwork. So once again, as in the case of realism, epistemological and literary or generic meanings should be distinguished before their relation is considered. Having established the communicative, and in this sense dialogical, nature of fieldwork, having realized that it is an activity that rests on exchange and conversation at least as much as it does on observation and recording, reflection moved on where it perhaps should have lingered to ponder epistemological implications.

Kevin Dwyer and Dennis Tedlock have been two outspoken advocates of dialogue in anthropology. In their well-known essays and later in their books, I have understood them to ask (by opposing dialogical to monological, or to analogical) whether dialogue, being central in the early phase of knowledge production, should not also generate a specific discourse in later phases, up to the final presentation of ethnography in a published text.<sup>20</sup>

Critics of Dwyer and Tedlock inevitably put their teeth into the most palpable part of what is really a complex epistemological argument, namely the dialogical form of ethnographic writing. Having found what is indeed a weak spot (the question whether actual dialogue as it occurs in fieldwork should or could ever be represented by written dialogue), they have been quick to dismiss dialogical ethnography as well intentioned but utopian. I should like to plead here for continued exploration of the dialogical nature of ethnographic research.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile we can continue to clarify relations between dialogue as event and dialogue as literary form. One thing seems to be certain: dialogue as a genre of ethnographic writing will not automatically preserve the dialogical nature of the knowledge process. I can think of two lines of argument leading to that conclusion.

First, the most compelling reason for acknowledging dialogue is not that the ethnographic process most often involves actual conversation. More significant is that our mind or thinking can produce ethnographic knowledge only because it is capable of being intersubjective. Thought does not function only by imposing logic on data but also by addressing statements and questions, by listening and responding, in short, by communicating with a real Other. Inasmuch as invoking

20. See Kevin Dwyer, "On the Dialogic of Field Work," *Dialectical Anthropology* 2 (May 1977): 143–51; "The Dialogic of Ethnology," *Dialectical Anthropology* 4 (Oct. 1979): 205–24; and *Moroccan Dialogues: Anthropology in Question* (Baltimore, 1982). See Dennis Tedlock, "The Analogical Tradition and the Emergence of Dialogical Anthropology," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 35 (Winter 1979): 387–400, and *The Spoken Word and the Work of Interpretation* (Philadelphia, 1983). See also *The Interpretation of Dialogue*, ed. Tullio Maranhão (Chicago, forthcoming).

21. This is being done in an as-yet-unpublished paper by Paul Friedrich and John Attinasi, "Dialogic Breakthrough: Catalysis and Synthesis in Life-Changing Dialogue."

dialogue serves to stress the intersubjective nature of ethnographic investigations, it signals an intent to go beyond positivism and scientism. To assure that this (epistemological) position informs all stages of the ethnographic knowledge process, it is not enough to cast the "results" into a dialogic form.

Admittedly, to be attentive to literary form (rather than passing off ethnography as neutral reporting according to unreflected canons) expresses recognition of the dialogical nature of ethnography inasmuch as it reflects recognition of the multiple audiences a writer addresses and of "constituencies" for whom he presumes to speak. But to insist that only one form, written dialogue, can do this would in my view run against the declared epistemological intentions of a dialogic approach.

There is another way to arrive at the same conclusion. It consists of applying what was said earlier about representation and mirror theories of knowledge. If dialogue as a literary genre were the only adequate (or accurate) representation of dialogic experience made during field research, it would thereby become "analogical" (in Tedlock's understanding of the term). If representationism is to be abandoned and replaced with a notion of praxis as described above, then the appropriate ways of conveying knowledge based on dialogic experience with the Other would be those that transform that experience in a struggle with "means of production" of discourse that include autobiography, political economy, relations of power, scientific canons, and literary form, but do not privilege dialogue as a genre. Conversely, ethnographic representations that are (or pretend to be) isomorphic with that which is being represented should be met with suspicion; more likely than not, they lack what distinguishes knowledge from mimicry.<sup>22</sup>

With that I have rehearsed my argument regarding poetry in anthropology. I do not pretend to have a full grasp of the issues involved in that particular debate. The remarks I am about to make are addressed to a recent publication, *Reflections: The Anthropological Muse*, especially to the editor's essay, J. Iain Prattis's "Dialectics and Experience in Fieldwork: The Poetic Dimension." Prattis diagnoses a "gap" in field reporting and suggests that this gap may be filled with a new, different "language of experience," which he and others have found in poetry as a form of ethnography. Throughout he defines the problem as one of overcoming the -emic/-etic distinction—between an inside and an outside view of other cultures—and the stifling effect it has had on theory and method in anthropology. At the same time he seems to accept that the constituting acts of field research consist of "observa-

22. Which is not to deny that mimesis is probably an aspect of all forms of knowing that qualify as ethnographic. On the issue of mimesis and recognition of an Other, see the interesting study by Fritz Kramer, *Der rote Fes: Über Besessenheit und Kunst in Afrika* (Frankfurt am Main, 1987).

tion."<sup>23</sup> If I understand him correctly, he advocates poetry as a new, possibly more adequate and hence privileged representation. With that, poetry, a literary genre, is set to compete with scientific prose, another literary genre. I do not deny that such competition may be healthy and entertaining, and that writing poems has helped individual anthropologists to overcome alienation from experience. At the same time I fear that it may do little to further the project of othering. To seek the solution for a problem regarding the production of knowledge in different or better representations of knowledge is to reaffirm, not to overcome, the representationist stance.

Matters are different with an approach exemplified by Paul Friedrich. His accomplishments as an ethnographer *and* as a poet put him above suspicion of using poetry as an escape from ethnography. More important, in his theoretical reflections Friedrich does not begin by advocating poetry as a literary genre but by arguing for poesis as an alternative to representationist conceptions of language and culture. I consider his eloquent critique of linguistic and anthropological obsession with order (and indeed of equating knowledge with the imposition of order on some presumed chaos) one of the most important theoretical advances in recent anthropology.<sup>24</sup>

In sum, dialogical and poetic conceptions of ethnographic knowledge touch the heart of questions about othering. But they have a chance to change the shape of ethnography only if they lead to literary processes that are hermeneutic-dialectical, or "practical," rather than representational. To preserve the dialogue with our interlocutors, to assure the Other's presence against the distancing devices of anthropological discourse, is to continue conversing with the Other on all levels of writing, not just to reproduce dialogues. In fact, I have gone as far as saying precisely that *if* fieldwork is conducted dialogically, problems of writing will not be resolved by adopting the dialogical form. Similarly, that we remain attentive to what I called the transformative, creative aspects of ethnographic knowledge, for which I gladly adopt the term *poetic*, will not be guaranteed by poetry as a form of writing.

I am willing to entertain the idea that adopting a dialogical and poetic master trope might change anthropologists from natural histori-

23. See J. Iain Prattis, "Dialectics and Experience in Fieldwork: The Poetic Dimension," in *Reflections: The Anthropological Muse*, ed. Prattis (Washington, D.C., 1985), pp. 266–83.

24. See Friedrich, "Linguistic Relativity and the Order-to-Chaos Continuum," in *On Linguistic Anthropology: Essays in Honor of Harry Hoijer, 1979*, ed. Jacques Maquet (Malibu, Calif., 1980), pp. 89–139; reprinted in Friedrich, *The Language Parallax: Linguistic Relativism and Poetic Indeterminacy* (Austin, Tex., 1986), pp. 117–52. An appreciation of Friedrich's poetry as well as of his theoretical contribution was given by Tyler in "The Poetic Turn in Postmodern Anthropology: The Poetry of Paul Friedrich," *American Anthropologist* 86 (June 1984): 328–36.

ans into itinerant bards, clowns, or preachers, and that this may ultimately be the aim of "being with others." But I still think that such purposeless conviviality must be earned by the critical labors of interpretation.

### *Writing and Not-Writing*

Different from, but not unrelated to, the kinds of critique of anthropological writing I have commented on so far is the debate about writing framed in the opposition of literacy and orality. Participants in this discussion take varied points of departure: some begin with writing as a technology, or with the special constraints imposed by our system of alphabetic writing; others ponder the changes that take place when sound-events are represented in writing, an issue that is related to that of contrasts between the verbal-aural and the graphic-visual; still others start with the societywide or global impact of literacy as a historical phenomenon; and so forth.<sup>25</sup> It is my impression that this debate, perhaps due to the influence of thinkers such as Walter Ong, Jacques Derrida, and Foucault, questions anthropological writing as a praxis of representation in a context of power more radically than the critique of genres.

That the problem with anthropological writing is a problem with relating to an Other is much more in the foreground in the literacy than in the literary discussion. The former also tends to give a more compelling expression to the anthropologist's dilemma: if writing is part of a system of intellectual and political oppression of the Other, how can we avoid contributing to that oppression if we go on writing? There are those who respond to a seemingly radical question with a radical answer; they give up writing about the Other and drop out, if not out of anthropology, then out of ethnography. But if the premise is correct, namely that given the power relations in this world writing as such is an act of oppression, then writing need not have the Other as its subject matter in order to oppress the Other. To stop writing altogether would seem to be a logical consequence (for those who care), but

25. See Jack Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (Cambridge, 1977), and his earlier work, *Literacy in Traditional Societies* (Cambridge, 1968). See also Ton Lemaire, "Antropologie en Schrift," in *Antropologie en Ideologie*, ed. Lemaire (Groningen, 1984), pp. 103–24; *Spoken and Written Language: Exploring Orality and Literacy*, ed. Deborah Tannen (Norwood, N.J., 1982); Tedlock, *The Spoken Word and the Work of Interpretation*; Tyler, "The Vision Quest in the West, or What the Mind's Eye Sees," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 40 (Spring 1984): 23–40; and *Literacy and Society*, ed. Karen Schousboe and Mogens Trolle Larsen (Copenhagen, 1989), especially the essay in that collection by Michael Harbsmeier, "Writing and the Other: Travellers' Literacy, or Towards an Archeology of Orality," pp. 197–228.



it is hard to see how it could ever become more than an isolated, and probably temporary, act of demonstration. No one expects critical anthropologists to regroup as a community of silent meditators or vociferous oral raconteurs.<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps we dare not say what we dare not hope: power relations must change.<sup>27</sup> What can experimenting with genres or the critique of writing accomplish toward that end? Well, to begin with, they can help, have already helped, to undermine the kind of naive security that went together with belief in scientific objectivity and the neutral nature of scientific prose. But is there a guarantee that oppressors will be less oppressive just because they become self-conscious? Consciousness-raising can only be preparatory to a critique that might have a chance of being truly subversive. I am not sure that I can make my point at this time, and within the limits of this essay, but I'll give it a try.

What needs to be subverted is a stubborn residue of positivity in conceptions of anthropological writing. Philosophical representationism engendered sociological positivism: human conduct, of which writing is one sort, is understood and explained as enactment of collective representations, as belief in beliefs, as valuation of values, as obedience to rules, as exercise of grammars. Such positivity makes it impossible to think negatively of conduct (as nonconduct) except as bad conduct, deviance. True, much has been accomplished in the last few decades in criticizing sociological positivism, but I wonder how far this went in the critique of ethnographic writing. A dialectical conception of writing (which I do not pretend to invent here, but neither do I want to bother at this moment with tracing its ancestry) holds that every act, every production, must contain its negation to become realized. Not-writing is a "moment" of writing. This sounds abstract and must be so in order to be thought. It is nevertheless eminently practical, as I would like to illustrate now with the help of some autobiographical reflections.

26. The problem is tricky enough as it stands, but it should at least be noted that to locate literacy on our side, and orality on the Other's, as some of the contributors to this debate seem to do, is a simplification that rapidly becomes too gross to be permitted even for the sake of the argument. As some of us who started as emissaries of literate societies facing oral cultures began to discover, literacy is catching up with us from the other side. In my own case, this has been one of the most striking findings in a project of "revisiting" the Jamaa movement in Shaba/Zaire twenty years after I had first written about it. See also Fabian, *History from Below: The Vocabulary of Elisabethville by André Yav* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia, 1990).

27. This is, of course, a point made by Edward W. Said in a recent essay published in this journal, "Representing the Colonized: Anthropology's Interlocutors," *Critical Inquiry* 15 (Winter 1989): 205–25. I was invited to comment on that essay but could not do so for reasons of time. Although it was written earlier, my paper may now be read as a response to Said after all.

Of the three projects of fieldwork I have undertaken so far (all of them in urban-industrial southern Zaire), the first one was dissertation research. It took the conventional eighteen months and produced a monograph and numerous articles. The latest one consisted of summer visits in 1985 and 1986; a paper and two books are about to be published. But there was also (now fifteen years ago) a period of almost three years of research, much better planned and perhaps more carefully carried out than the other two, which so far has yielded only one major article and no monograph. I have spent much time coming to grips with my unwillingness or inability to "write up" the rich data I collected in those years. In fact, part of my trouble has been to decide whether it was unwillingness or inability. Or was it just the absence of pressure because I had gotten professional security in the meantime?

Perhaps my failure to turn this project into ethnography was a sign of liberation from scientism and from a conception of writing as a sort of production line, running from "raw data" through theoretical processing to final monographic assembly. Between the first and the second fieldwork, I had spent much of my theoretical energy criticizing this view as positivist and scientific. Was I now paying the price for rocking the scientific boat? I also found out that if one has abandoned empiricist-positivist notions of data as collected pieces of information waiting to be fed into one or the other analytical machinery; if one has come to realize that ethnographic data are not "given" but "made" through communication; if, in a sense, ethnographic "material" has become subjective, autobiographical, then the problem of unused data or unwritten monographs becomes more, not less, pressing. The expectation that it should be less urgent might arise from an easing of pressures to execute research projects according to rigid canons. But it does not seem to work that way. No tension is more acute than the intrapersonal experience of unfinished work, all the more so because, on this personal level, we experience the presence of the Other. It is this experience of presence—an experience, by the way, that may grow with time and, at any rate, needs time to grow—that lies at the origin of my struggling with the idea of representation as praxis.

Freed from the strictures to view personal experiences and their embodiment in recordings, notes, pictures, and so forth, as ethnographic data that become only what they ought to be through representation, the ethnographer has several alternatives. One (see above) is to experiment with writing in an effort to communicate "ethnography" as directly and vividly as possible. Another is to dissociate these data from any scheme or purpose and to treat them as necessary but gratuitous, like the air we breathe (if this is still an appropriate image), as elements that nourish anthropology without having first been processed into ethnographic monographs. This is one aspect of what I meant by not-writing as part of writing. It is unlikely that

funding agencies will accept this view and start sponsoring gratuitous field experience (that they have often done this in the past cannot have escaped their attention); still, to leave much or most of what was experienced unwritten about is how anthropological writing works and always did work, even though this was not always recognized.<sup>28</sup>

Because the problem is not so much writing in general but ethnographic writing, there is yet another form of not-writing to be considered. To show this, I return to my own case. I may have given the impression that I felt that my first fieldwork was adequately “written up” with ethnographic publications, that the third project was well on its way to turning into ethnography, while I had hardly written anything about the project in between. So strong are our internalized conceptions of ethnography as representation that it takes a special effort of reflection to realize that all of this is inaccurate. Throughout the years I produced “theoretical” and “historical” studies that seemed to be not-writing from the point of view of ethnography because they were not descriptive of what I had found out in field research. Yet none of them would have been conceived and carried out without those experiences. In this sense, these writings are the results of processes that originated “in the field” without being representations of them. They are attempts to formulate insights in response to concrete, practical demands—such as teaching, lecturing, publishing, and making a living in academic institutions—while trying to stay in the presence of the Other.<sup>29</sup>

If recognizing the necessity of what I called not-writing helps to further a conception of ethnography as praxis, all the better. I realize

28. I remember Paul Bohannon declaring many years ago that should he ever discover a Ph.D. candidate having put everything he knew about the subject into his thesis, he would refuse to certify the candidate as an anthropologist. The realization that ethnographic notes, far from only providing a finite quantity of information, are only contingent extractions from an inexhaustible reservoir of matters for thought shows how misguided (maybe not ethically, but epistemologically) demands are to consign one’s “data” to public depositories. This is, of course, not to deny that certain kinds of material that have a documentary character of their own can be shared by more than one ethnographer and may even be of importance to the people studied.

29. *Time and the Other* (1983), for instance, is in no obvious way about the Jamaa movement, which I began to study in 1965. But I know—and an outside reader might notice this even more than I do—that some of the theoretical issues I address in this book were first experienced as practical problems; and there are some theoretical insights I owe to the teachings of the movement. Similarly, *Language and Colonial Power* (1986) is not an ethnography of sociolinguistic research on language and labor conducted in 1972–74. It is a historical study with some theoretical pretensions, but to me it has been the only practical way to make sense of what I had naively taken to be a “given” linguistic situation.

that it is not as such a remedy for what is wrong in our relations with the Other. It helps to create conditions for othering—recognition of the Other that is not limited to representations of the Other.

All this makes little more than a start on a long road toward undoing ethnographic representationism. Several of the issues I touched on need to be recast in more subtle terms. Take not-writing, for instance. In its first form discussed above, I described it as a rather trivial case of inevitable selectivity: some data are chosen, others omitted. Positivists write that way, what is so dialectical about it? I hope to have given part of an answer, but the idea needs to be worked out more fully. Furthermore, are cases of not-writing that seem to be a personal affliction and are known to have destroyed careers something altogether different from the ethnographer's temporary silence or the preservation of unwritten-about experience as an ethnographic branch to sit on? How much confusion is spread in discussions of anthropological writing by a failure to distinguish not only between literature and literacy but also between writing and publishing? An important part of myself is now defined as a writer. Given my lack of talents *en belles lettres*, this would not have happened had I not as an anthropologist sought to converse with an Other and then been pressured to communicate my insights in writing. Through writing I work as best I can on making my experiences critically useful both to the community for which I write and the community about which I write (and there are signs that the two are merging). But does that mean that the people I studied would profit much from reading those of my writings that conventions of anthropological publishing have qualified as acceptable ethnography? In *Time and the Other* I made an oblique remark to the effect that given the dominant rhetoric of anthropological discourse, the Other's ethnographic presence goes together with his theoretical absence. In ethnography as we know it, the Other is displayed, and therefore contained, as an object of representation; the Other's voice, demands, teachings are usually absent from our theorizing.

Should this current search attain its highest aims—to transform ethnography into a praxis capable of making the Other present (rather than making representations predicated on the Other's absence)—then the work of interpretation can begin. In the end all questioning of the How must be in the service of understanding the What, what it is all about. And the answer to that question carries no promise of illumination:

There are those who say that a native will not speak to a white man. Error. No man will speak to his master; but to a wanderer and a friend, to him who does not come to teach or to rule, to him who asks for nothing and accepts all things, words are spoken by the camp-fires, in the shared solitude of the sea, in riverside villages, in

resting-places surrounded by forests—words are spoken that take no account of race or colour. One heart speaks—another one listens; and the earth, the sea, the sky, the passing wind and the stirring leaf, hear also the futile tale of the burden of life.<sup>30</sup>

30. Joseph Conrad, "Karain: A Memory," *Selected Tales from Conrad*, ed. Nigel Stewart (London, 1977), pp. 65–66.