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Introduction: Partial Truths

Interdisciplinary work, so much discussed these days, is not about confronting already constituted disciplines (none of which, in fact, is willing to let itself go). To do something interdisciplinary it's not enough to choose a “subject” (a theme) and gather around it two or three sciences. Interdisciplinarity consists in creating a new object that belongs to no one.

ROLAND BARTHES, “Jeunes Chercheurs”

You’ll need more tables than you think.

ELENORE SMITH BOWEN, advice for fieldworkers,
in Return to Laughter

Our frontispiece shows Stephen Tyler, one of this volume's contributors, at work in India in 1963. The ethnographer is absorbed in writing—taking dictation? fleshing out an interpretation? recording an important observation? dashing off a poem? Hunched over in the heat, he has draped a wet cloth over his glasses. His expression is obscured. An interlocutor looks over his shoulder—with boredom? patience? amusement? In this image the ethnographer hovers at the edge of the frame—faceless, almost extraterrestrial, a hand that writes. It is not the usual portrait of anthropological fieldwork. We are more accustomed to pictures of Margaret Mead exuberantly playing with children in Manus or questioning villagers in Bali. Participant-observation, the classic formula for ethnographic work, leaves little room for texts. But still, somewhere lost in his account of fieldwork among the Mbuti pygmies—running along jungle paths, sitting up at night singing, sleeping in a crowded leaf hut—Colin Turnbull mentions that he lugged around a typewriter.

In Bronislaw Malinowski's Argonauts of the Western Pacific, where a photograph of the ethnographer's tent among Kiriwinan dwellings is prominently displayed, there is no revelation of the tent's interior. But in another photo, carefully posed, Malinowski recorded himself writ-
ing at a table. (The tent flaps are pulled back; he sits in profile, and some Trobrianders stand outside, observing the curious rite.) This remarkable picture was only published two years ago—a sign of our times, not his.¹ We begin, not with participant-observation or with cultural texts (suitable for interpretation), but with writing, the making of texts. No longer a marginal, or occulted, dimension, writing has emerged as central to what anthropologists do both in the field and thereafter. The fact that it has not until recently been portrayed or seriously discussed reflects the persistence of an ideology claiming transparency of representation and immediacy of experience. Writing reduced to method: keeping good field notes, making accurate maps, “writing up” results.

The essays collected here assert that this ideology has crumbled. They see culture as composed of seriously contested codes and representations; they assume that the poetic and the political are inseparable, that science is in, not above, historical and linguistic processes. They assume that academic and literary genres interpenetrate and that the writing of cultural descriptions is properly experimental and ethical. Their focus on text making and rhetoric serves to highlight the constructed, artificial nature of cultural accounts. It undermines overly transparent modes of authority, and it draws attention to the historical predicament of ethnography, the fact that it is always caught up in the invention, not the representation, of cultures (Wagner 1975). As will soon be apparent, the range of issues raised is not literary in any traditional sense. Most of the essays, while focusing on textual practices, reach beyond texts to contexts of power, resistance, institutional constraint, and innovation.

Ethnography’s tradition is that of Herodotus and of Montesquieu’s Persian. It looks obliquely at all collective arrangements, distant or nearby. It makes the familiar strange, the exotic quotidian. Ethnography cultivates an engaged clarity like that urged by Virginia Woolf: “Let us never cease from thinking—what is this ‘civilization’ in which we find ourselves? What are these ceremonies and why should we take part in them? What are these professions and why should we make money out of them? Where in short is it leading us, the procession of the sons of educated men?” (1936: 62–63). Ethnography is actively situated between powerful systems of meaning. It poses its questions at the boundaries of civilizations, cultures, classes, races, and genders. Ethnography decodes and recodes, telling the grounds of collective order and diversity, inclusion and exclusion. It describes processes of

¹. Malinowski 1961: 17. The photograph inside the tent was published in 1983 by George Stocking in History of Anthropology 1:101. This volume contains other telling scenes of ethnographic writing.
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innovation and structuration, and is itself part of these processes.

Ethnography is an emergent interdisciplinary phenomenon. Its authority and rhetoric have spread to many fields where “culture” is a newly problematic object of description and critique. The present book, though beginning with fieldwork and its texts, opens onto the wider practice of writing about, against, and among cultures. This blurred purview includes, to name only a few developing perspectives, historical ethnography (Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, Natalie Davis, Carlo Ginzburg), cultural poetics (Stephen Greenblatt), cultural criticism (Hayden White, Edward Said, Fredric Jameson), the analysis of implicit knowledge and everyday practices (Pierre Bourdieu, Michel de Certeau), the critique of hegemonic structures of feeling (Raymond Williams), the study of scientific communities (following Thomas Kuhn), the semiotics of exotic worlds and fantastic spaces (Tzvetan Todorov, Louis Marin), and all those studies that focus on meaning systems, disputed traditions, or cultural artifacts.

This complex interdisciplinary area, approached here from the starting point of a crisis in anthropology, is changing and diverse. Thus I do not want to impose a false unity on the exploratory essays that follow. Though sharing a general sympathy for approaches combining poetics, politics, and history, they frequently disagree. Many of the contributions fuse literary theory and ethnography. Some probe the limits of such approaches, stressing the dangers of estheticism and the constraints of institutional power. Others enthusiastically advocate experimental forms of writing. But in their different ways they all analyze past and present practices out of a commitment to future possibilities. They see ethnographic writing as changing, inventive: “History,” in William Carlos Williams’s words, “that should be a left hand to us, as of a violinist.”

“Literary” approaches have recently enjoyed some popularity in the human sciences. In anthropology influential writers such as Clifford Geertz, Victor Turner, Mary Douglas, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jean Duvignaud, and Edmund Leach, to mention only a few, have shown an interest in literary theory and practice. In their quite different ways they have blurred the boundary separating art from science. Nor is theirs a new attraction. Malinowski’s authorial identifications (Conrad, Frazer) are well known. Margaret Mead, Edward Sapir, and Ruth Benedict saw themselves as both anthropologists and literary artists. In Paris surrealism and professional ethnography regularly exchanged both ideas and personnel. But until recently literary influences have been held at a distance from the “rigorous” core of
the discipline. Sapir and Benedict had, after all, to hide their poetry from the scientific gaze of Franz Boas. And though ethnographers have often been called novelists manqué (especially those who write a little too well), the notion that literary procedures pervade any work of cultural representation is a recent idea in the discipline. To a growing number, however, the “literariness” of anthropology—and especially of ethnography—appears as much more than a matter of good writing or distinctive style.² Literary processes—metaphor, figuration, narrative—affect the ways cultural phenomena are registered, from the first jotted “observations,” to the completed book, to the ways these configurations “make sense” in determined acts of reading.³

It has long been asserted that scientific anthropology is also an “art,” that ethnographies have literary qualities. We often hear that an author writes with style, that certain descriptions are vivid or convincing (should not every accurate description be convincing?). A work is deemed evocative or artfully composed in addition to being factual; expressive, rhetorical functions are conceived as decorative or merely as ways to present an objective analysis or description more effectively. Thus the facts of the matter may be kept separate, at least in principle, from their means of communication. But the literary or rhetorical dimensions of ethnography can no longer be so easily compartmentalized. They are active at every level of cultural science. Indeed, the very notion of a “literary” approach to a discipline, “anthropology,” is seriously misleading.

The present essays do not represent a tendency or perspective within a coherent “anthropology” (pace Wolf 1980). The “four-field” definition of the discipline, of which Boas was perhaps the last virtuoso, included physical (or biological) anthropology, archaeology, cultural (or social) anthropology, and linguistics. Few today can seriously claim that these fields share a unified approach or object, though the dream persists, thanks largely to institutional arrangements. The essays in this volume occupy a new space opened up by the disintegration of “Man” as telos for a whole discipline, and they draw on recent developments in the fields of textual criticism, cultural history, semiotics, hermeneutic philosophy, and psychoanalysis. Some years ago, in


³. See the work of Hayden White (1973, 1978) for a tropological theory of “prefigured” realities; also Latour and Woolgar (1979) for a view of scientific activity as “inscription.”
a trenchant essay, Rodney Needham surveyed the theoretical incoherence, tangled roots, impossible bedfellows, and divergent specializations that seemed to be leading to academic anthropology’s intellectual disintegration. He suggested with ironic equanimity that the field might soon be redistributed among a variety of neighboring disciplines. Anthropology in its present form would undergo “an iridescent metamorphosis” (1970:46). The present essays are part of the metamorphosis.

But if they are post-anthropological, they are also post-literary. Michel Foucault (1973), Michel de Certeau (1983), and Terry Eagleton (1989) have recently argued that “literature” itself is a transient category. Since the seventeenth century, they suggest, Western science has excluded certain expressive modes from its legitimate repertoire: rhetoric (in the name of “plain,” transparent signification), fiction (in the name of fact), and subjectivity (in the name of objectivity). The qualities eliminated from science were localized in the category of “literature.” Literary texts were deemed to be metaphoric and allegorical, composed of inventions rather than observed facts; they allowed a wide latitude to the emotions, speculations, and subjective “genius” of their authors. De Certeau notes that the fictions of literary language were scientifically condemned (and esthetically appreciated) for lacking “univocity,” the purportedly unambiguous accounting of natural science and professional history. In this schema, the discourse of literature and fiction is inherently unstable; it “plays on the stratification of meaning; it narrates one thing in order to tell something else; it delineates itself in a language from which it continuously draws effects of meaning that cannot be circumscribed or checked” (1983:128). This discourse, repeatedly banished from science, but with uneven success, is incurably figurative and polysemous. (Whenever its effects begin to be felt too openly, a scientific text will appear “literary”; it will seem to be using too many metaphors, to be relying on style, evocation, and so on.)

By the nineteenth century, literature had emerged as a bourgeois institution closely allied with “culture” and “art.” Raymond Williams (1966) shows how this special, refined sensibility functioned as a kind of court of appeals in response to the perceived dislocations and vulgarity of industrial, class society. Literature and art were, in effect, cir-

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4. “It might be objected that **figurative style** is not the only style, or even the only poetic style, and that rhetoric also takes cognizance of what is called **simple** style. But in fact this is merely a less decorated style, or rather, a style decorated more simply, and it, too, like the lyric and the epic, has its own special figures. A style in which figure is strictly absent does not exist,” writes Gérard Genette (1982:47).
cumscribed zones in which nonutilitarian, “higher” values were maintained. At the same time they were domains for the playing out of experimental, avant-garde transgressions. Seen in this light, the ideologi-
cal formations of art and culture have no essential or eternal sta-
tus. They are changing and contestable, like the special rhetoric of
“literature.” The essays that follow do not, in fact, appeal to a literary
practice marked off in an esthetic, creative, or humanizing domain.
They struggle, in their different ways, against the received definitions
of art, literature, science, and history. And if they sometimes suggest
that ethnography is an “art,” they return the word to an older usage—
before it had become associated with a higher or rebellious sensibil-
ity—to the eighteenth-century meaning Williams recalls: art as the
skillful fashioning of useful artifacts. The making of ethnography is
artisanal, tied to the worldly work of writing.

Ethnographic writing is determined in at least six ways: (1) contextu-
ally (it draws from and creates meaningful social milieux); (2)
rhetorically (it uses and is used by expressive conventions); (3) institu-
tionally (one writes within, and against, specific traditions, disciplines,
audiences); (4) generically (an ethnography is usually distinguishable
from a novel or a travel account); (5) politically (the authority to rep-
resent cultural realities is unequally shared and at times contested);
(6) historically (all the above conventions and constraints are chang-
ing). These determinations govern the inscription of coherent ethno-
graphic fictions.

To call ethnographies fictions may raise empiricist hackles. But
the word as commonly used in recent textual theory has lost its con-
notation of falsehood, of something merely opposed to truth. It sug-
gests the partiality of cultural and historical truths, the ways they are
systematic and exclusive. Ethnographic writings can properly be
called fictions in the sense of “something made or fashioned,” the
principal burden of the word’s Latin root, fingere. But it is important
to preserve the meaning not merely of making, but also of making up,
of inventing things not actually real. (Fingere, in some of its uses, im-
plied a degree of falsehood.) Interpretive social scientists have re-
cently come to view good ethnographies as “true fictions,” but usually
at the cost of weakening the oxymoron, reducing it to the banal claim
that all truths are constructed. The essays collected here keep the oxy-
moron sharp. For example, Vincent Crapanzano portrays ethnog-
raphers as tricksters, promising, like Hermes, not to lie, but never un-
dertaking to tell the whole truth either. Their rhetoric empowers and
subverts their message. Other essays reinforce the point by stressing
that cultural fictions are based on systematic, and contestable, exclud-
es. These may involve silencing incongruent voices (“Two Crows
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...denies it!" or deploying a consistent manner of quoting, “speaking for,” translating the reality of others. Purportedly irrelevant personal or historical circumstances will also be excluded (one cannot tell all). Moreover, the maker (but why only one?) of ethnographic texts cannot avoid expressive tropes, figures, and allegories that select and impose meaning as they translate it. In this view, more Nietzschean than realist or hermeneutic, all constructed truths are made possible by powerful “lies” of exclusion and rhetoric. Even the best ethnographic texts—serious, true fictions—are systems, or economies, of truth. Power and history work through them, in ways their authors cannot fully control.

Ethnographic truths are thus inherently partial—committed and incomplete. This point is now widely asserted—and resisted at strategic points by those who fear the collapse of clear standards of verification. But once accepted and built into ethnographic art, a rigorous sense of partiality can be a source of representational tact. A recent work by Richard Price, *First-Time: The Historical Vision of an Afro-American People* (1983), offers a good example of self-conscious, serious partiality. Price recounts the specific conditions of his fieldwork among the Saramakas, a Maroon society of Suriname. We learn about external and self-imposed limits to the research, about individual informants, and about the construction of the final written artifact. (The book avoids a smoothed-over, monological form, presenting itself as literally pieced-together, full of holes.) *First-Time* is evidence of the fact that acute political and epistemological self-consciousness need not lead to ethnographic self-absorption, or to the conclusion that it is impossible to know anything certain about other people. Rather, it leads to a concrete sense of why a Saramaka folktale, featured by Price, teaches that “knowledge is power, and that one must never reveal all of what one knows” (1983: 14).

A complex technique of revelation and secrecy governs the communication (reinvention) of “First-Time” knowledge, lore about the society’s crucial struggles for survival in the eighteenth century. Using techniques of deliberate frustration, digression, and incompleteness, old men impart their historical knowledge to younger kinsmen, preferably at cock’s crow, the hour before dawn. These strategies of ellipsis, concealment, and partial disclosure determine ethnographic relations as much as they do the transmission of stories between generations. Price has to accept the paradoxical fact that “any Saramaka narrative (including those told at cock’s crow with the ostensible intent of communicating knowledge) will leave out most of what the teller knows about the incident in question. A person’s knowledge is supposed to grow only in small increments, and in any aspect of life
people are deliberately told only a little bit more than the speaker thinks they already know” (10).

It soon becomes apparent that there is no “complete” corpus of First-Time knowledge, that no one—least of all the visiting ethnographer—can know this lore except through an open-ended series of contingent, power-laden encounters. “It is accepted that different Saramaka historians will have different versions, and it is up to the listener to piece together for himself the version of an event that he, for the time being, accepts” (28). Though Price, the scrupulous fieldworker and historian, armed with writing, has gathered a text that surpasses in extent what individuals know or tell, it still “represents only the tip of the iceberg that Saramakas collectively preserve about First-Time” (25).

The ethical questions raised by forming a written archive of secret, oral lore are considerable, and Price wrestles with them openly. Part of his solution has been to undermine the completeness of his own account (but not its seriousness) by publishing a book that is a series of fragments. The aim is not to indicate unfortunate gaps remaining in our knowledge of eighteenth-century Saramaka life, but rather to present an inherently imperfect mode of knowledge, which produces gaps as it fills them. Though Price himself is not free of the desire to write a complete ethnography or history, to portray a “whole way of life” (24), the message of partiality resonates throughout First-Time.

Ethnographers are more and more like the Cree hunter who (the story goes) came to Montreal to testify in court concerning the fate of his hunting lands in the new James Bay hydroelectric scheme. He would describe his way of life. But when administered the oath he hesitated: “I’m not sure I can tell the truth . . . I can only tell what I know.”

It is useful to recall that the witness was speaking artfully, in a determining context of power. Since Michel Leiris’s early essay of 1950, “L’Ethnographe devant le colonialisme” (but why so late?), anthropology has had to reckon with historical determination and political conflict in its midst. A rapid decade, from 1950 to 1960, saw the end of empire become a widely accepted project, if not an accomplished fact. Georges Balandier’s “situation coloniale” was suddenly visible (1955). Imperial relations, formal and informal, were no longer the accepted rule of the game—to be reformed piecemeal, or ironically distanced in various ways. Enduring power inequalities had clearly constrained ethnographic practice. This “situation” was felt earliest in
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France, largely because of the Vietnamese and Algerian conflicts and through the writings of an ethnographically aware group of black intellectuals and poets, the négritude movement of Aimé Césaire, Léopold Senghor, René Ménil, and Léon Damas. The pages of Présence Africaine in the early fifties offered an unusual forum for collaboration between these writers and social scientists like Balandier, Leiris, Marcel Griaule, Edmond Ortizues, and Paul Rivet. In other countries the crise de conscience came somewhat later. One thinks of Jacques Maquet’s influential essay “Objectivity in Anthropology” (1964), Dell Hymes’s Reinventing Anthropology (1973), the work of Stanley Diamond (1974), Bob Scholte (1971, 1972, 1978), Gérard Leclerc (1972), and particularly of Talal Asad’s collection Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter (1973), which has stimulated much clarifying debate (Firth et al. 1977).

In popular imagery the ethnographer has shifted from a sympathetic, authoritative observer (best incarnated, perhaps, by Margaret Mead) to the unflattering figure portrayed by Vine Deloria in Custer Died for Your Sins (1969). Indeed, the negative portrait has sometimes hardened into caricature—the ambitious social scientist making off with tribal lore and giving nothing in return, imposing crude portraits on subtle peoples, or (most recently) serving as dupe for sophisticated informants. Such portraits are about as realistic as the earlier heroic versions of participant-observation. Ethnographic work has indeed been enmeshed in a world of enduring and changing power inequalities, and it continues to be implicated. It enacts power relations. But its function within these relations is complex, often ambivalent, potentially counter-hegemonic.

Different rules of the game for ethnography are now emerging in many parts of the world. An outsider studying Native American cultures may expect, perhaps as a requirement for continuing research, to testify in support of land claim litigation. And a variety of formal restrictions are now placed on fieldwork by indigenous governments at national and local levels. These condition in new ways what can, and especially cannot, be said about particular peoples. A new figure has entered the scene, the “indigenous ethnographer” (Fahim, ed. 1982; Ohnuki-Tierney 1984). Insiders studying their own cultures offer new angles of vision and depths of understanding. Their accounts are empowered and restricted in unique ways. The diverse post- and neocolonial rules for ethnographic practice do not necessarily encourage “better” cultural accounts. The criteria for judging a good account have never been settled and are changing. But what has emerged from all these ideological shifts, rule changes, and new compromises is the fact that a series of historical pressures have begun to reposition
anthropology with respect to its “objects” of study. Anthropology no longer speaks with automatic authority for others defined as unable to speak for themselves (“primitive,” “pre-literate,” “without history”). Other groups can less easily be distanced in special, almost always past or passing, times—represented as if they were not involved in the present world systems that implicate ethnographers along with the peoples they study. “Cultures” do not hold still for their portraits. Attempts to make them do so always involve simplification and exclusion, selection of a temporal focus, the construction of a particular self-other relationship, and the imposition or negotiation of a power relationship.

The critique of colonialism in the postwar period—an undermining of “The West’s” ability to represent other societies—has been reinforced by an important process of theorizing about the limits of representation itself. There is no way adequately to survey this multifarious critique of what Vico called the “serious poem” of cultural history. Positions proliferate: “hermeneutics,” “structuralism,” “history of mentalities,” “neo-Marxism,” “genealogy,” “post-structuralism,” “post-modernism,” “pragmatism”; also a spate of “alternate epistemologies”—feminist, ethnic, and non-Western. What is at stake, but not always recognized, is an ongoing critique of the West’s most confident, characteristic discourses. Diverse philosophies may implicitly have this critical stance in common. For example, Jacques Derrida’s unraveling of logocentrism, from the Greeks to Freud, and Walter J. Ong’s quite different diagnosis of the consequences of literacy share an overarching rejection of the institutionalized ways one large group of humanity has for millennia construed its world. New historical studies of hegemonic patterns of thought (Marxist, Annaliste, Foucaultian) have in common with recent styles of textual criticism (semitotic, reader-response, post-structural) the conviction that what appears as “real” in history, the social sciences, the arts, even in common sense, is always analyzable as a restrictive and expressive set of social codes and conventions. Hermeneutic philosophy in its varying styles, from Wilhelm Dilthey and Paul Ricoeur to Heidegger, reminds us that the simplest cultural accounts are intentional creations, that interpreters constantly construct themselves through the others they study. The twentieth-century sciences of “language,” from Ferdinand de Saussure and Roman Jacobson to Benjamin Lee Whorf, Sapir, and Wittgenstein, have made inescapable the systematic and situational verbal structures that determine all representations of reality. Finally, the return of rhetoric to an important place in many fields of study (it had for millennia been at the core of Western education) has made possible a detailed anatomy of conventional expressive modes. Allied
with semiotics and discourse analysis, the new rhetoric is concerned with what Kenneth Burke called “strategies for the encompassing of situations” (1969: 3). It is less about how to speak well than about how to speak at all, and to act meaningfully, in the world of public cultural symbols.

The impact of these critiques is beginning to be felt in ethnography’s sense of its own development. Noncelebratory histories are becoming common. The new histories try to avoid charting the discovery of some current wisdom (origins of the culture concept, and so forth); and they are suspicious of promoting and demoting intellectual precursors in order to confirm a particular paradigm. (For the latter approach, see Harris 1968 and Evans-Pritchard 1981). Rather, the new histories treat anthropological ideas as enmeshed in local practices and institutional constraints, as contingent and often “political” solutions to cultural problems. They construe science as a social process. They stress the historical discontinuities, as well as continuities, of past and present practices, as often as not making present knowledge seem temporary, in motion. The authority of a scientific discipline, in this kind of historical account, will always be mediated by the claims of rhetoric and power.  

Another major impact of the accumulating political/theoretical critique of anthropology may be briefly summarized as a rejection of “visualism.” Ong (1967, 1977), among others, has studied ways in which the senses are hierarchically ordered in different cultures and epochs. He argues that the truth of vision in Western, literate cultures has predominated over the evidences of sound and interlocution, of touch, smell, and taste. (Mary Pratt has observed that references to odor, very prominent in travel writing, are virtually absent from ethnographies.) The predominant metaphors in anthropological research have been participant-observation, data collection, and cultural description, all of which presuppose a standpoint outside—looking at, objectifying, or, somewhat closer, “reading,” a given reality. Ong’s

5. I exclude from this category the various histories of “anthropological” ideas, which must always have a Whiggish cast. I include the strong historicism of George Stocking, which often has the effect of questioning disciplinary genealogies (for example, 1968:69–90). The work of Terry Clark on the institutionalization of social science (1975) and of Foucault on the sociopolitical constitution of “discursive formations” (1973) points in the direction I am indicating. See also: Hartog (1980), Duchet (1971), many works by De Certeau (e.g., 1980), Boon (1982), Rupp-Eisenreich (1984), and the yearly volume History of Anthropology, edited by Stocking, whose approach goes well beyond the history of ideas or theory. An allied approach can be found in recent social studies of science research: e.g., Knorr-Cetina (1981), Latour (1984), Knorr-Cetina and Mulkay (1983).

6. An observation by Pratt at the Santa Fe seminar. The relative inattention to sound is beginning to be corrected in recent ethnographic writing (e.g., Feld 1982). For examples of work unusually attentive to the sensorium, see Stoller (1984a, b).
work has been mobilized as a critique of ethnography by Johannes Fabian (1983), who explores the consequences of positing cultural facts as things observed, rather than, for example, heard, invented in dialogue, or transcribed. Following Frances Yates (1966), he argues that the taxonomic imagination in the West is strongly visualist in nature, constituting cultures as if they were theaters of memory, or spatialized arrays.

In a related polemic against “Orientalism” Edward Said (1978) identifies persistent tropes by which Europeans and Americans have visualized Eastern and Arab cultures. The Orient functions as a theater, a stage on which a performance is repeated, to be seen from a privileged standpoint. (Barthes [1977] locates a similar “perspective” in the emerging bourgeois esthetics of Diderot.) For Said, the Orient is “textualized”; its multiple, divergent stories and existential predicaments are coherently woven as a body of signs susceptible of virtuoso reading. This Orient, occulted and fragile, is brought lovingly to light, salvaged in the work of the outside scholar. The effect of domination in such spatial/temporal deployments (not limited, of course, to Orientalism proper) is that they confer on the other a discrete identity, while also providing the knowing observer with a standpoint from which to see without being seen, to read without interruption.

Once cultures are no longer prefigured visually—as objects, theaters, texts—it becomes possible to think of a cultural poetics that is an interplay of voices, of positioned utterances. In a discursive rather than a visual paradigm, the dominant metaphors for ethnography shift away from the observing eye and toward expressive speech (and gesture). The writer’s “voice” pervades and situates the analysis, and objective, distancing rhetoric is renounced. Renato Rosaldo has recently argued, and exemplified, these points (1984, 1985). Other changes of textual enactment are urged by Stephen Tyler in this volume. (See also Tedlock 1983.) The evocative, performative elements of ethnography are legitimated. And the crucial poetic problem for a discursive ethnography becomes how “to achieve by written means what speech creates, and to do it without simply imitating speech” (Tyler 1984c: 25). From another angle we notice how much has been said, in criticism and praise, of the ethnographic gaze. But what of the ethnographic ear? This is what Nathaniel Tarn is getting at in an interview, speaking of his experience as a tricultural French/Englishman endlessly becoming an American.

It may be the ethnographer or the anthropologist again having his ears wider open to what he considers the exotic as opposed to the familiar, but I still feel I’m discovering something new in the use of language here almost every day.
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I’m getting new expressions almost every day, as if the language were growing from every conceivable shoot. (1975:9)

An interest in the discursive aspects of cultural representation draws attention not to the interpretation of cultural “texts” but to their relations of production. Divergent styles of writing are, with varying degrees of success, grappling with these new orders of complexity—different rules and possibilities within the horizon of a historical moment. The main experimental trends have been reviewed in detail elsewhere (Marcus and Cushman 1982; Clifford 1983a). It is enough to mention here the general trend toward a specification of discourses in ethnography: who speaks? who writes? when and where? with or to whom? under what institutional and historical constraints?

Since Malinowski’s time, the “method” of participant-observation has enacted a delicate balance of subjectivity and objectivity. The ethnographer’s personal experiences, especially those of participation and empathy, are recognized as central to the research process, but they are firmly restrained by the impersonal standards of observation and “objective” distance. In classical ethnographies the voice of the author was always manifest, but the conventions of textual presentation and reading forbade too close a connection between authorial style and the reality represented. Though we discern immediately the distinctive accent of Margaret Mead, Raymond Firth, or Paul Radin, we still cannot refer to Samoans as “Meadian” or call Tikopia a “Firthian” culture as freely as we speak of Dickensian or Flaubertian worlds. The subjectivity of the author is separated from the objective referent of the text. At best, the author’s personal voice is seen as a style in the weak sense: a tone, or embellishment of the facts. Moreover, the actual field experience of the ethnographer is presented only in very stylized ways (the “arrival stories” discussed below by Mary Pratt, for example). States of serious confusion, violent feelings or acts, censorships, important failures, changes of course, and excessive pleasures are excluded from the published account.

In the sixties this set of expository conventions cracked. Ethnographers began to write about their field experience in ways that disturbed the prevailing subjective/objective balance. There had been earlier disturbances, but they were kept marginal: Leiris’s aberrant L’Afrique fantôme (1934); Tristes Tropiques (whose strongest impact outside France came only after 1960); and Elenore Smith Bowen’s important Return to Laughter (1954). That Laura Bohannan in the early sixties had to disguise herself as Bowen, and her fieldwork narrative as a “novel,” is symptomatic. But things were changing rapidly,
and others—Georges Balandier (L’Afrique ambiguë 1957), David Maybury-Lewis (The Savage and the Innocent 1965), Jean Briggs (Never in Anger 1970), Jean-Paul Dumont (The Headman and I 1978), and Paul Rabinow (Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco 1977)—were soon writing “factualy” under their own names. The publication of Malinowski’s Mailu and Trobriand diaries (1967) publicly upset the applecart. Henceforth an implicit mark of interrogation was placed beside any overly confident and consistent ethnographic voice. What desires and confusions was it smoothing over? How was its “objectivity” textually constructed? 

A subgenre of ethnographic writing emerged, the self-reflexive “fieldwork account.” Various sophisticated and naïve, confessional and analytic, these accounts provide an important forum for the discussion of a wide range of issues, epistemological, existential, and political. The discourse of the cultural analyst can no longer be simply that of the “experienced” observer, describing and interpreting custom. Ethnographic experience and the participant-observation ideal are shown to be problematic. Different textual strategies are attempted. For example, the first person singular (never banned from ethnographies, which were always personal in stylized ways) is deployed according to new conventions. With the “fieldwork account” the rhetoric of experienced objectivity yields to that of the autobiography and the ironic self-portrait. (See Beaujour 1980, Lejeune 1975.) The ethnographer, a character in a fiction, is at center stage. He or she can speak of previously “irrelevant” topics: violence and desire, confusions, struggles and economic transactions with informants. These matters (long discussed informally within the discipline) have moved away from the margins of ethnography, to be seen as constitutive, inescapable (Honigman 1976).

Some reflexive accounts have worked to specify the discourse of informants, as well as that of the ethnographer, by staging dialogues or narrating interpersonal confrontations (Lacoste-Dujardin 1977, Crapanzano 1980, Dwyer 1982, Shostak 1981, Mernissi 1984). These fictions of dialogue have the effect of transforming the “cultural” text (a ritual, an institution, a life history, or any unit of typical behavior to be described or interpreted) into a speaking subject, who sees as well as is seen, who evades, argues, probes back. In this view of ethnography the proper referent of any account is not a represented “world”; now it is specific instances of discourse. But the principle of dialogical textual production goes well beyond the more or less artful presenta-

7. I have explored the relation of personal subjectivity and authoritative cultural accounts, seen as mutually reinforcing fictions, in an essay on Malinowski and Conrad (Clifford 1985a).
Introduction

tion of “actual” encounters. It locates cultural interpretations in many sorts of reciprocal contexts, and it obliges writers to find diverse ways of rendering negotiated realities as multisubjective, power-laden, and incongruent. In this view, “culture” is always relational, an inscription of communicative processes that exist, historically, between subjects in relations of power (Dwyer 1977, Tedlock 1979).

Dialogical modes are not, in principle, autobiographical; they need not lead to hyper self-consciousness or self-absorption. As Bakhtin (1981) has shown, dialogical processes proliferate in any complexly represented discursive space (that of an ethnography, or, in his case, a realist novel). Many voices clamor for expression. Polyvocality was restrained and orchestrated in traditional ethnographies by giving to one voice a pervasive authorial function and to others the role of sources, “informants,” to be quoted or paraphrased. Once dialogism and polyphony are recognized as modes of textual production, monophonic authority is questioned, revealed to be characteristic of a science that has claimed to represent cultures. The tendency to specify discourses—historically and intersubjectively—recasts this authority, and in the process alters the questions we put to cultural descriptions. Two recent examples must suffice. The first involves the voices and readings of Native Americans, the second those of women.

James Walker is widely known for his classic monograph The Sun Dance and Other Ceremonies of the Oglala Division of the Teton Sioux (1917). It is a carefully observed and documented work of interpretation. But our reading of it must now be complemented—and altered—by an extraordinary glimpse of its “makings.” Three titles have now appeared in a four-volume edition of documents he collected while a physician and ethnographer on the Pine Ridge Sioux Reservation between 1896 and 1914. The first (Walker, Lakota Belief and Ritual 1982a, edited by Raymond DeMallie and Elaine Jahner) is a collage of notes, interviews, texts, and essay fragments written or spoken by Walker and numerous Oglala collaborators. This volume lists more than thirty “authorities,” and wherever possible each contribution is marked with the name of its enunciator, writer, or transcriber. These individuals are not ethnographic “informants.” Lakota Belief is a collaborative work of documentation, edited in a manner that gives equal rhetorical weight to diverse renditions of tradition. Walker’s own descriptions and glosses are fragments among fragments.

The ethnographer worked closely with interpreters Charles and Richard Nines, and with Thomas Tyon and George Sword, both of whom composed extended essays in Old Lakota. These have now been translated and published for the first time. In a long section of Lakota Belief Tyon presents explanations he obtained from a number
of Pine Ridge shamans; and it is revealing to see questions of belief (for example the crucial and elusive quality of “wakan”) interpreted in differing, idiosyncratic styles. The result is a version of culture in process that resists any final summation. In Lakota Belief the editors provide biographical details on Walker, with hints about the individual sources of the writings in his collection, brought together from the Colorado Historical Society, the American Museum of Natural History, and the American Philosophical Society.

The second volume to have appeared is Lakota Society (1982b), which assembles documents roughly relating to aspects of social organization, as well as concepts of time and history. The inclusion of extensive Winter Counts (Lakota annals) and personal recollections of historical events confirms recent tendencies to question overly clear distinctions between peoples “with” and “without” history (Rosaldo 1980; Price 1983). Volume three is Lakota Myth (1983). And the last will contain the translated writings of George Sword. Sword was an Oglala warrior, later a judge of the Court of Indian Offenses at Pine Ridge. With Walker’s encouragement, he wrote a detailed vernacular record of customary life, covering myth, ritual, warfare and games, complemented by an autobiography.

Taken together, these works offer an unusual, multiply articulated record of Lakota life at a crucial moment in its history—a three-volume anthology of ad hoc interpretations and transcriptions by more than a score of individuals occupying a spectrum of positions with respect to “tradition,” plus an elaborated view of the ensemble by a well-placed Oglala writer. It becomes possible to assess critically the synthesis Walker made of these diverse materials. When complete, the five volumes (including The Sun Dance) will constitute an expanded (dispersed, not total) text representing a particular moment of ethnographic production (not “Lakota culture”). It is this expanded text, rather than Walker’s monograph, that we must now learn to read.

Such an ensemble opens up new meanings and desires in an ongoing cultural poesis. The decision to publish these texts was provoked by requests to the Colorado Historical Society from community members at Pine Ridge, where copies were needed in Oglala history classes. For other readers the “Walker Collection” offers different lessons, providing, among other things, a mock-up for an ethnopoetics with history (and individuals) in it. One has difficulty giving these materials (many of which are very beautiful) the timeless, impersonal identity of, say, “Sioux myth.” Moreover, the question of who writes (performs? transcribes? translates? edits?) cultural statements is inescapable in an expanded text of this sort. Here the ethnographer no longer holds unquestioned rights of salvage: the authority long as-