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Writing Against Culture

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Writing Culture (Clifford and Marcus 1986), the collection that marked a major new form of critique of cultural anthropology's premises, more or less excluded two critical groups whose situations neatly expose and challenge the most basic of those premises: feminists and "halfies" – people whose national or cultural identity is mixed by virtue of migration, overseas education, or parentage.¹ In his introduction, Clifford (1986a) apologizes for the feminist absence; no one mentions halfies or the indigenous anthropologists to whom they are related. Perhaps they are not yet numerous enough or sufficiently self-defined as a group.² The importance of these two groups lies not in any superior moral claim or advantage they might have in doing anthropology, but in the special dilemmas they face, dilemmas that reveal starkly the problems with cultural anthropology's assumption of a fundamental distinction between self and other.

In this essay I explore how feminists and halfies, by the way their anthropological practice unsettles the boundary between self and other, enable us to reflect on the conventional nature and political effects of this distinction and ultimately to reconsider the value of the concept of culture on which it

depends. I will argue that "culture" operates in anthropological discourse to enforce separations that inevitably carry a sense of hierarchy. Therefore, anthropologists should now pursue, without exaggerated hopes for the power of their texts to change the world, a variety of strategies for writing *against* culture. For those interested in textual strategies, I explore the advantages of what I call "ethnographies of the particular" as instruments of a tactical humanism.

Selves and Others

The notion of culture (especially as it functions to distinguish "cultures"), despite a long usefulness, may now have become something anthropologists would want to work against in their theories, their ethnographic practice, and their ethnographic writing. A helpful way to begin to grasp why is to consider what the shared elements of feminist and halfie anthropology clarify about the self/other distinction central to the paradigm of anthropology.

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Marilyn Strathern (1985, 1987) raises some of the issues regarding feminism in essays that both Clifford and Rabinow cited in *Writing Culture*. Her thesis is that the relationship between anthropology and feminism is awkward. This thesis leads her to try to understand why feminist scholarship, in spite of its rhetoric of radicalism, has failed to fundamentally alter anthropology, and why feminism has gained even less from anthropology than vice versa.

The awkwardness, she argues, arises from the fact that despite a common interest in differences, the scholarly practices of feminists and anthropologists are "differently structured in the way they organize knowledge and draw boundaries" (Strathern 1987: 289) and especially in "the nature of the investigators' relationship to their subject matter" (1987: 284). Feminist scholars, united by their common opposition to men or to patriarchy, produce a discourse composed of many voices; they "discover the self by becoming conscious of oppression from the Other" (1987: 289). Anthropologists, whose goal is "to make sense of differences" (1987: 286), also constitute their "selves" in relation to an other, but do not view this other as "under attack" (1987: 289).

In highlighting the self/other relationship, Strathern takes us to the heart of the problem. Yet she retreats from the problematic of power (granted as formative in feminism) in her strangely uncritical depiction of anthropology. When she defines anthropology as a discipline that "continues to know itself as the study of social behavior or society in terms of systems and collective representations" (1987: 281), she underplays the self/other distinction. In characterizing the relationship between anthropological self and other as nonadversarial, she ignores its most fundamental aspect. Anthropology's avowed goal may be "the study of man [sic]," but it is a discipline built on the historically constructed divide between the West and the non-West. It has been and continues to be primarily the study of the non-Western other by the Western self, even if in its new guise it seeks explicitly to give voice to the Other or to present a dialogue between the self and other, either textually or through an explication of the fieldwork encounter (as in such works as Crapanzano 1980, Dumont 1978, Dwyer 1982, Rabinow 1977, Riesman 1977, Tedlock 1983, and Tyler 1986). And the relationship between the West and the non-

West, at least since the birth of anthropology, has been constituted by Western domination. This suggests that the awkwardness Strathern senses in the relationship between feminism and anthropology might better be understood as the result of diametrically opposed processes of self-construction through opposition to others – processes that begin from different sides of a power divide.

The enduring strength of what Morsy (1988: 70) has called "the hegemony of the distinctive-other tradition" in anthropology is betrayed by the defensiveness of partial exceptions. Anthropologists [...] conducting fieldwork in the United States or Europe wonder whether they have not blurred the disciplinary boundaries between anthropology and other fields such as sociology or history. One way to retain their identities as anthropologists is to make the communities they study seem "other." Studying ethnic communities and the powerless assures this.³ So does concentrating on "culture" [...], for reasons I will discuss later. There are two issues here. One is the conviction that one cannot be objective about one's own society, something that affects indigenous anthropologists (Western or non-Western). The second is a tacit understanding that anthropologists study the non-West; halfies who study their own or related non-Western communities are still more easily recognizable as anthropologists than Americans who study Americans.

If anthropology continues to be practiced as the study by an unproblematic and unmarked Western self of found "others" out there, feminist theory, an academic practice that also traffics in selves and others, has in its relatively short history come to realize the danger of treating selves and others as givens. It is instructive for the development of a critique of anthropology to consider the trajectory that has led, within two decades, to what some might call a crisis in feminist theory, and others, the development of postfeminism.

From Simone de Beauvoir on, it has been accepted that, at least in the modern West, women have been the other to men's self. Feminism has been a movement devoted to helping women become selves and subjects rather than objects and men's others.⁴ The crisis in feminist theory (related to a crisis in the women's movement) that followed on the heels of feminist attempts to turn those who had

been constituted as other into selves – or, to use the popular metaphor, to let women speak – was the problem of “difference.” For whom did feminists speak? Within the women’s movement, the objections of lesbians, African-American women, and other “women of color” that their experiences as women were different from those of white, middle-class, heterosexual women problematized the identity of women as selves. Cross-cultural work on women also made it clear that masculine and feminine did not have, as we say, the same meanings in other cultures, nor did Third World women’s lives resemble Western women’s lives. As Harding (1986: 246) puts it, the problem is that “once ‘woman’ is deconstructed into ‘women’ and ‘gender’ is recognized to have no fixed referents, feminism itself dissolves as a theory that can reflect the voice of a naturalized or essentialized speaker.”⁵

From its experience with this crisis of selfhood or subjecthood, feminist theory can offer anthropology two useful reminders. First, the self is always a construction, never a natural or found entity, even if it has that appearance. Second, the process of creating a self through opposition to an other always entails the violence of repressing or ignoring other forms of difference. Feminist theorists have been forced to explore the implications for the formation of identity and the possibilities for political action of the ways in which gender as a system of difference is intersected by other systems of difference, including, in the modern capitalist world, race and class.

Where does this leave the feminist anthropologist? Strathern (1987: 286) characterizes her as experiencing a tension – “caught between structures . . . faced with two different ways of relating to her or his subject matter.” The more interesting aspect of the feminist’s situation, though, is what she shares with the halfie: a blocked ability to comfortably assume the self of anthropology. For both, although in different ways, the self is split, caught at the intersection of systems of difference. I am less concerned with the existential consequences of this split (these have been eloquently explored elsewhere [e.g., Joseph 1988, Kondo 1986, Narayan 1989]) than with the awareness such splits generate about three crucial issues: positionality, audience, and the power inherent in distinctions of self and other. What happens when the “other” that the anthro-

pologist is studying is simultaneously constructed as, at least partially, a self?

Feminists and halfie anthropologists cannot easily avoid the issue of positionality. Standing on shifting ground makes it clear that every view is a view from somewhere and every act of speaking a speaking from somewhere. Cultural anthropologists have never been fully convinced of the ideology of science and have long questioned the value, possibility, and definition of objectivity.⁶ But they still seem reluctant to examine the implications of the actual situatedness of their knowledge.⁷

Two common, intertwined objections to the work of feminist or native or semi-native anthropologists, both related to partiality, betray the persistence of ideals of objectivity. The first has to do with the partiality (as bias or position) of the observer. The second has to do with the partial (incomplete) nature of the picture presented. Halfies are more associated with the first problem, feminists the second. The problem with studying one’s own society is alleged to be the problem of gaining enough distance. Since for halfies, the Other is in certain ways the self, there is said to be the danger shared with indigenous anthropologists of identification and the easy slide into subjectivity.⁸ These worries suggest that the anthropologist is still defined as a being who must stand apart from the Other, even when he or she seeks explicitly to bridge the gap. Even Bourdieu (1977: 1–2), who perceptively analyzed the effects this outsider stance has on the anthropologist’s (mis)understanding of social life, fails to break with this doxa. The obvious point he misses is that the outsider self never simply stands outside. He or she stands in a definite relation with the Other of the study, not just as a Westerner, but as a Frenchman in Algeria during the war of independence, an American in Morocco during the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, or an Englishwoman in postcolonial India. What we call the outside is a position *within* a larger political-historical complex. No less than the halfie, the “wholie” is in a specific position vis-à-vis the community being studied.

The debates about feminist anthropologists suggest a second source of uneasiness about positionality. Even when they present themselves as studying gender, feminist anthropologists are dismissed as presenting only a partial picture of the societies they study because they are assumed to be studying only women.

Anthropologists study society, the unmarked form. The study of women is the marked form, too readily sectioned off, as Strathern (1985) notes.⁹ Yet it could easily be argued that most studies of society have been equally partial. As restudies like Weiner's (1976) of Malinowski's Trobriand Islanders or Bell's (1983) of the well-studied Australian aborigines indicate, they have been the study of men.¹⁰ This does not make such studies any less valuable; it merely reminds us that we must constantly attend to the positionality of the anthropological self and its representations of others. James Clifford (1986a: 6), among others, has convincingly argued that ethnographic representations are always "partial truths." What is needed is a recognition that they are also positioned truths.

Split selfhood creates for the two groups being discussed a second problem that is illuminating for anthropology generally: multiple audiences. Although all anthropologists are beginning to feel what might be called the Rushdie effect – the effects of living in a global age when the subjects of their studies begin to read their works and the governments of the countries they work in ban books and deny visas – feminist and halfie anthropologists struggle in poignant ways with multiple accountability. Rather than having one primary audience, that of other anthropologists, feminist anthropologists write for anthropologists and for feminists, two groups whose relationship to their subject matter is at odds and who hold ethnographers accountable in different ways.¹¹ Furthermore, feminist circles include non-Western feminists, often from the societies feminist anthropologists have studied, who call them to account in new ways.¹²

Halfies' dilemmas are even more extreme. As anthropologists, they write for other anthropologists, mostly Western. Identified also with communities outside the West, or subcultures within it, they are called to account by educated members of those communities. More importantly, not just because they position themselves with reference to two communities but because when they present the Other they are presenting themselves, they speak with a complex awareness of and investment in reception. Both halfie and feminist anthropologists are forced to confront squarely the politics and ethics of their representations. There are no easy solutions to their dilemmas.

The third issue that feminist and halfie anthropologists, unlike anthropologists who work in Western societies (another group for whom self and other are somewhat tangled), force us to confront is the dubiousness of maintaining that relationships between self and other are innocent of power. Because of sexism and racial or ethnic discrimination, they may have experienced – as women, as individuals of mixed parentage, or as foreigners – being other to a dominant self, whether in everyday life in the U.S., Britain, or France, or in the Western academy. This is not simply an experience of difference, but of inequality. My argument, however, is structural, not experiential. Women, blacks, and people of most of the non-West have been historically constituted as others in the major political systems of difference on which the unequal world of modern capitalism has depended. Feminist studies and black studies have made sufficient progress within the academy to have exposed the way that being studied by "white men" (to use a shorthand for a complex and historically constituted subject-position) turns into being spoken for by them. It becomes a sign and instrument of their power.

Within anthropology, despite a long history of self-conscious opposition to racism, a fast-growing, self-critical literature on anthropology's links to colonialism (for example, Asad 1973, Clifford 1983, Fabian 1983, Hymes 1969, Kuper 1988), and experimentation with techniques of ethnography to relieve a discomfort with the power of anthropologist over anthropological subject, the fundamental issues of domination keep being skirted. Even attempts to refigure informants as consultants and to "let the other speak" in dialogic (Tedlock 1987) or polyvocal texts – decolonizations on the level of the text – leave intact the basic configuration of global power on which anthropology, as linked to other institutions of the world, is based. To see the strangeness of this enterprise, all that is needed is to consider an analogous case. What would our reaction be if male scholars stated their desire to "let women speak" in their texts while they continued to dominate all knowledge about them by controlling writing and other academic practices, supported in their positions by a particular organization of economic, social, and political life?

Because of their split selves, feminist and halfie anthropologists travel uneasily between speaking "for" and speaking "from." Their situation enables us to see more clearly that dividing practices, whether they naturalize differences, as in gender or race, or simply elaborate them, as I will argue the concept of culture does, are fundamental methods of enforcing inequality.

Culture and Difference

The concept of culture is the hidden term in all that has just been said about anthropology. Most American anthropologists believe or act as if "culture," notoriously resistant to definition and ambiguous of referent, is nevertheless the true object of anthropological inquiry. Yet it could also be argued that culture is important to anthropology because the anthropological distinction between self and other rests on it. Culture is the essential tool for making other. As a professional discourse that elaborates on the meaning of culture in order to account for, explain, and understand cultural difference, anthropology also helps construct, produce, and maintain it. Anthropological discourse gives cultural difference (and the separation between groups of people it implies) the air of the self-evident.

In this regard, the concept of culture operates much like its predecessor – race – even though in its twentieth-century form it has some important political advantages. Unlike race, and unlike even the nineteenth-century sense of culture as a synonym for civilization (contrasted to barbarism), the current concept allows for multiple rather than binary differences. This immediately checks the easy move to hierarchizing; the shift to "culture" ("lower case *c* with the possibility of a final *s*," as Clifford [1988a: 234] puts it) has a relativizing effect. The most important of culture's advantages, however, is that it removes difference from the realm of the natural and the innate. Whether conceived of as a set of behaviors, customs, traditions, rules, plans, recipes, instructions, or programs (to list the range of definitions Geertz [1973: 44] furnishes), culture is learned and can change.

Despite its anti-essentialist intent, however, the culture concept retains some of the tendencies to freeze difference possessed by concepts like race. This is easier to see if we consider a field in which there has been a shift from one to the other. Orientalism as a scholarly discourse (among other things) is, according to Said (1978: 2), "a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident'." What he shows is that in mapping geography, race, and culture onto one another, Orientalism fixes differences between people of "the West" and people of "the East" in ways so rigid that they might as well be considered innate. In the twentieth century, cultural difference, not race, has been the basic subject of Orientalist scholarship devoted now to interpreting the "culture" phenomena (primarily religion and language) to which basic differences in development, economic performance, government, character, and so forth are attributed.

Some anticolonial movements and present-day struggles have worked by what could be labelled reverse Orientalism, where attempts to reverse the power relationship proceed by seeking to valorize for the self what in the former system had been devalued as other. A Gandhian appeal to the greater spirituality of a Hindu India, compared with the materialism and violence of the West, and an Islamicist appeal to a greater faith in God, compared with the immorality and corruption of the West, both accept the essentialist terms of Orientalist constructions. While turning them on their heads, they preserve the rigid sense of difference based on culture.

A parallel can be drawn with feminism. It is a basic tenet of feminism that "women are made, not born." It has been important for most feminists to locate sex differences in culture, not biology or nature. While this has inspired some feminist theorists to attend to the social and personal effects of gender as a system of difference, for many others it has led to explorations of and strategies built on the notion of a women's culture. Cultural feminism (cf. Echols 1984) takes many forms, but it has many of the qualities of reverse Orientalism just discussed. For French feminists like Irigaray (1985a, 1985b), Cixous (1983), and Kristeva (1981), masculine and

feminine, if not actually male and female, represent essentially different modes of being. Anglo-American feminists take a different tack. Some attempt to "describe" the cultural differences between men and women – Gilligan (1982) and her followers (e.g., Belenky et al. 1986) who elaborate the notion of "a different voice" are popular examples. Others try to "explain" the differences, whether through a socially informed psychoanalytic theory (e.g., Chodorow 1978), a Marxist-derived theory of the effects of the division of labor and women's role in social reproduction (Hartsock 1985), an analysis of maternal practice (Ruddick 1980), or even a theory of sexual exploitation (MacKinnon 1982). Much feminist theorizing and practice seeks to build or reform social life in line with this "women's culture."¹³ There have been proposals for a woman-centered university (Rich 1979), a feminist science, a feminist methodology in the sciences and social sciences (Meis 1983; Reinhartz 1983; Smith 1987; Stanley and Wise 1983; see Harding 1987 for a sensible critique), and even a feminist spirituality and ecology. These proposals nearly always build on values traditionally associated in the West with women – a sense of care and connectedness, maternal nurturing, immediacy of experience, involvement in the bodily (versus the abstract), and so forth.

This valorization by cultural feminists, like reverse Orientalists, of the previously devalued qualities attributed to them may be provisionally useful in forging a sense of unity and in waging struggles of empowerment. Yet because it leaves in place the divide that structured the experiences of selfhood and oppression on which it builds, it perpetuates some dangerous tendencies. First, cultural feminists overlook the connections between those on each side of the divide, and the ways in which they define each other. Second, they overlook differences within each category constructed by the dividing practices, differences like those of class, race, and sexuality (to repeat the feminist litany of problematically abstract categories), but also ethnic origin, personal experience, age, mode of livelihood, health, living situation (rural or urban), and historical experience. Third, and perhaps most important, they ignore the ways in which experiences have been constructed historically and have changed over time. Both cultural feminism and revivalist movements

tend to rely on notions of authenticity and the return to positive values not represented by the dominant other. As becomes obvious in the most extreme cases, these moves erase history. Invocations of Cretan goddesses in some cultural-feminist circles and, in a more complex and serious way, the powerful invocation of the seventh-century community of the Prophet in some Islamic movements are good examples.

The point is that the notion of culture which both types of movements use does not seem to guarantee an escape from the tendency toward essentialism. It could be argued that anthropologists use "culture" in more sophisticated and consistent ways and that their commitment to it as an analytical tool is firmer. Yet even many of them are now concerned about the ways it tends to freeze differences. Appadurai (1988), for example, in his compelling argument that "natives" are a figment of the anthropological imagination, shows the complicity of the anthropological concept of culture in a continuing "incarceration" of non-Western peoples in time and place. Denied the same capacity for movement, travel, and geographical interaction that Westerners take for granted, the cultures studied by anthropologists have tended to be denied history as well.

Others, including myself (1990b), have argued that cultural theories also tend to overemphasize coherence. Clifford notes both that "the discipline of fieldwork-based anthropology, in constituting its authority, constructs and reconstructs coherent cultural others and interpreting selves" (Clifford 1988b: 112) and that ethnography is a form of culture collecting (like art collecting) in which "diverse experiences and facts are selected, gathered, detached from their original temporal occasions, and given enduring value in a new arrangement" (Clifford 1988a: 231). Organic metaphors of wholeness and the methodology of holism that characterizes anthropology both favor coherence, which in turn contributes to the perception of communities as bounded and discrete.

Certainly discreteness does not have to imply value; the hallmark of twentieth-century anthropology has been its promotion of cultural relativism over evaluation and judgment. If anthropology has always to some extent been a form of cultural (self-) critique (Marcus and Fischer, 1986), that too was an aspect of

a refusal to hierarchize difference. Yet neither position would be possible without difference. It would be worth thinking about the implications of the high stakes anthropology has in sustaining and perpetuating a belief in the existence of cultures that are identifiable as discrete, different, and separate from our own.¹⁴ Does difference always smuggle in hierarchy?

In *Orientalism*, Said (1978: 28) argues for the elimination of "the Orient" and "the Occident" altogether. By this he means not the erasure of all differences but the recognition of more of them and of the complex ways in which they crosscut. More important, his analysis of one field seeks to show how and when certain differences, in this case of places and the people attached to them, become implicated in the domination of one by the other. Should anthropologists treat with similar suspicion "culture" and "cultures" as the key terms in a discourse in which otherness and difference have come to have, as Said (1989: 213) points out, "talismanic qualities"?

Three Modes of Writing Against Culture

If "culture," shadowed by coherence, timelessness, and discreteness, is the prime anthropological tool for making "other," and difference, as feminists and halfies reveal, tends to be a relationship of power, then perhaps anthropologists should consider strategies for writing against culture. I will discuss three that I find promising. Although they by no means exhaust the possibilities, the sorts of projects I will describe – theoretical, substantive, and textual – make sense for anthropologists sensitive to issues of positionality and accountability and interested in making anthropological practice something that does not simply shore up global inequalities. I will conclude, however, by considering the limitations of all anthropological reform.

Discourse and practice

Theoretical discussion, because it is one of the modes in which anthropologists engage each other,

provides an important site for contesting "culture." It seems to me that current discussions and deployments of two increasingly popular terms – practice and discourse – do signal a shift away from culture. Although there is always the danger that these terms will come to be used simply as synonyms for culture, they were intended to enable us to analyze social life without presuming the degree of coherence that the culture concept has come to carry.

Practice is associated, in anthropology, with Bourdieu (1977; also see Ortner 1984), whose theoretical approach is built around problems of contradiction, misunderstanding, and misrecognition, and favors strategies, interests, and improvisations over the more static and homogenizing cultural tropes of rules, models, and texts. Discourse (whose uses I discuss in L. Abu-Lughod 1989 and Abu-Lughod and Lutz 1990) has more diverse sources and meanings in anthropology. In its Foucauldian derivation, as it relates to notions of discursive formations, apparatuses, and technologies, it is meant to refuse the distinction between ideas and practices or text and world that the culture concept too readily encourages. In its more sociolinguistic sense, it draws attention to the social uses by individuals of verbal resources. In either case, it allows for the possibility of recognizing within a social group the play of multiple, shifting, and competing statements with practical effects. Both practice and discourse are useful because they work against the assumption of boundedness, not to mention the idealism (Asad 1983), of the culture concept.¹⁵

Connections

Another strategy of writing against culture is to reorient the problems or subject matter anthropologists address. An important focus should be the various connections and interconnections, historical and contemporary, between a community and the anthropologist working there and writing about it, not to mention the world to which he or she belongs and which enables him or her to be in that particular place studying that group. This is more of a political project than an existential one, although the reflexive anthropologists who have taught us to

focus on the fieldwork encounter as a site for the construction of the ethnographic "facts" have alerted us to one important dimension of the connection. Other significant sorts of connections have received less attention. Pratt (1986: 42) notes a regular mystification in ethnographic writing of "the larger agenda of European expansion in which the ethnographer, regardless of his or her own attitudes to it, is caught up, and that determines the ethnographer's own material relationship to the group under study." We need to ask questions about the historical processes by which it came to pass that people like ourselves could be engaged in anthropological studies of people like those, about the current world situation that enables us to engage in this sort of work in this particular place, and about who has preceded us and is even now there with us (tourists, travelers, missionaries, AID consultants, Peace Corps workers). We need to ask what this "will to knowledge" about the Other is connected to in the world.

These questions cannot be asked in general; they should be asked about and answered by tracing through specific situations, configurations, and histories. Even though they do not address directly the place of the ethnographer, and even though they engage in an oversystemization that threatens to erase local interactions, studies like those of Wolf (1982) on the long history of interaction between particular Western societies and communities in what is now called the Third World represent important means of answering such questions. So do studies like Mintz's (1985) that trace the complex processes of transformation and exploitation in which, in Europe and other parts of the world, sugar was involved. The anthropological turn to history, tracing connections between the present and the past of particular communities, is also an important development.

Not all projects about connections need be historical. Anthropologists are increasingly concerned with national and transnational connections of people, cultural forms, media, techniques, and commodities.¹⁶ They study the articulation of world capitalism and international politics with the situations of people living in particular communities. All these projects, which involve a shift in gaze to include phenomena of connection, expose the

inadequacies of the concept of culture and the elusiveness of the entities designated by the term *cultures*. Although there may be a tendency in the new work merely to widen the object, shifting from culture to nation as locus, ideally there would be attention to the shifting groupings, identities, and interactions within and across such borders as well. If there was ever a time when anthropologists could consider without too much violence at least some communities as isolated units, certainly the nature of global interactions in the present makes that now impossible.¹⁷

Ethnographies of the particular

The third strategy for writing against culture depends on accepting the one insight of Geertz's about anthropology that has been built upon by everyone in this "experimental moment" (Marcus and Fischer 1986) who takes textuality seriously. Geertz (1975, 1988) has argued that one of the main things anthropologists do is write, and what they write are fictions (which does not mean they are fictitious).¹⁸ Certainly the practice of ethnographic writing has received an inordinate amount of attention from those involved in *Writing Culture* and an increasing number of others who were not involved. Much of the hostility toward their project arises from the suspicion that in their literary leanings they have too readily collapsed the politics of ethnography into its poetics. And yet they have raised an issue that cannot be ignored. Insofar as anthropologists are in the business of representing others through their ethnographic writing, then surely the degree to which people in the communities they study appear "other" must also be partly a function of how anthropologists write about them. Are there ways to write about lives so as to constitute others as less other?

I would argue that one powerful tool for unsettling the culture concept and subverting the process of "othering" it entails is to write "ethnographies of the particular." Generalization, the characteristic mode of operation and style of writing of the social sciences, can no longer be regarded as neutral description (Foucault 1978; Said 1978; Smith 1987). It has two unfortunate effects in anthropology that

make it worth eschewing. I will explore these before presenting some examples from my own work of what one could hope to accomplish through ethnographies of the particular.

I will not be concerned with several issues frequently raised about generalization. For example, it has often been pointed out that the generalizing mode of social scientific discourse facilitates abstraction and reification. Feminist sociologist Dorothy Smith (1987: 130) put the problem vividly in her critique of sociological discourse by noting that

the complex organization of activities of actual individuals and their actual relations is entered into the discourse through concepts such as class, modernization, formal organization. A realm of theoretically constituted objects is created, freeing the discursive realm from its ground in the lives and work of actual individuals and liberating sociological inquiry to graze on a field of conceptual entities.

Other critics have fixed on different flaws. Interpretive anthropology, for example, in its critique of the search for general laws in positivistic social science, notes a failure to take account of the centrality of meaning to human experience. Yet the result has been to substitute generalization about meanings for generalizations about behavior.

I also want to make clear what the argument for particularity is not: it is not to be mistaken for arguments for privileging micro over macro processes. Ethnomethodologists [...] and other students of everyday life seek ways to generalize about microinteractions, while historians might be said to be tracing the particulars of macroprocesses. Nor need a concern with the particulars of individuals' lives imply disregard for forces and dynamics that are not locally based. On the contrary, the effects of extralocal and long-term processes are only manifested locally and specifically, produced in the actions of individuals living their particular lives, inscribed in their bodies and their words. What I am arguing for is a form of writing that might better convey that.

There are two reasons for anthropologists to be wary of generalization. The first is that, as part of a professional discourse of "objectivity" and expertise, it is inevitably a language of power. On the one hand, it is the language of those who seem to

stand apart from and outside of what they are describing. Again, Smith's critique of sociological discourse is relevant. She has argued (1987: 62) that this seemingly detached mode of reflecting on social life is actually located: it represents the perspective of those involved in professional, managerial, and administrative structures and is thus part of "the ruling apparatus of this society." This critique applies as well to anthropology with its inter- rather than intrasocietal perspective and its origins in the exploration and colonization of the non-European world rather than the management of internal social groups like workers, women, blacks, the poor, or prisoners.

On the other hand, even if we withhold judgment on how closely the social sciences can be associated with the apparatuses of management, we have to recognize how all professionalized discourses by nature assert hierarchy. The very gap between the professional and authoritative discourses of generalization and the languages of everyday life (our own and others') establishes a fundamental separation between the anthropologist and the people being written about that facilitates the construction of anthropological objects as simultaneously different and inferior.

Thus, to the degree that anthropologists can bring closer the language of everyday life and the language of the text, this mode of making other is reversed. The problem is, as a reflection on the situation of feminist anthropologists suggest, that there may be professional risks for ethnographers who want to pursue this strategy. I have argued elsewhere (1990a) that Rabinow's refreshingly sensible observation about the politics of ethnographic writing – that they are to be found closer to home, in academia, than in the colonial and neocolonial world – helps us understand a few things about feminist anthropology and the uneasiness about it that even someone like Clifford betrays in his introductory essay for *Writing Culture*.¹⁹ His excuse for excluding feminist anthropologists was that they were not involved in textual innovation. If we were to grant the dubious distinction he presumes between textual innovation and transformations of content and theory, we might concede that feminist anthropologists have contributed little to the new wave of experimentation in form.

But then a moment's thought would provide us with clues about why. Without even asking the basic questions about individuals, institutions, patrons, and tenure, we can turn to the politics of the feminist project itself. Dedicated to making sure that women's lives are represented in descriptions of societies and women's experiences and gender itself theorized in accounts of how societies work, feminist scholars have been interested in the old political sense of representation. Conservatism of form may have been helpful because the goal was to persuade colleagues that an anthropology taking gender into account was not just good anthropology but better anthropology.

The second pressure on feminist anthropology is the need to assert professionalism. Contrary to what Clifford writes (1986a: 21), women *have* produced "unconventional forms of writing." He just ignored them, neglecting a few professional anthropologists like Bowen (Bohannon) (1954), Briggs (1970), and Cesara (Poewe) (1982) who have experimented with form.²⁰ More significantly, there is also what might be considered a separate "woman's tradition" within ethnographic writing. Because it is not professional, however, it might only reluctantly be claimed and explored by feminist anthropologists uncertain of their standing. I am referring to the often excellent and popular ethnographies written by the "untrained" wives of anthropologists, books like Elizabeth Fernea's *Guests of the Sheik* (1965), Marjorie Shostak's *Nisa* (1981), Edith Turner's *The Spirit of the Drum* (1987), and Margery Wolf's *The House of Lim* (1968). Directing their works to audiences slightly different from those of the professional writers of standard ethnographies, they have also followed different conventions: they are more open about their positionality, less assertive of their scientific authority, and more focused on particular individuals and families.

[...]

The second problem with generalization derives not from its participation in the authoritative discourses of professionalism but from the effects of homogeneity, coherence, and timelessness it tends to produce. When one generalizes from experiences and conversations with a number of specific people in a community, one tends to flatten out differences among them and to homogenize them. The appear-

ance of an absence of internal differentiation makes it easier to conceive of a group of people as a discrete, bounded entity, like the "the Nuer," "the Balinese," and "the Awlad 'Ali Bedouin'" who do this or that and believe such-and-such. The effort to produce general ethnographic descriptions of people's beliefs or actions tends to smooth over contradictions, conflicts of interest, and doubts and arguments, not to mention changing motivations and circumstances. The erasure of time and conflict make what is inside the boundary set up by homogenization something essential and fixed. These effects are of special moment to anthropologists because they contribute to the fiction of essentially different and discrete others who can be separated from some sort of equally essential self. Insofar as difference is, as I have argued, hierarchical, and assertions of separation a way of denying responsibility, generalization itself must be treated with suspicion.

For these reasons I propose that we experiment with narrative ethnographies of the particular in a continuing tradition of fieldwork-based writing.²¹ In telling stories about particular individuals in time and place, such ethnographies would share elements with the alternative "women's tradition" discussed above. I would expect them to complement rather than replace a range of other types of anthropological projects, from theoretical discussions to the exploration of new topics within anthropology [...]

Anthropologists commonly generalize about communities by saying that they are characterized by certain institutions, rules, or ways of doing things. For example, we can and often do say things like "The Bongo-Bongo are polygynous." Yet one could refuse to generalize in this way, instead asking how a particular set of individuals – for instance, a man and his three wives in a Bedouin community in Egypt whom I have known for a decade – live the "institution" that we call polygyny. Stressing the particularity of this marriage and building a picture of it through the participants' discussions, recollections, disagreements, and actions would make several theoretical points.

First, refusing to generalize would highlight the constructed quality of that typicality so regularly produced in conventional social scientific accounts.

Second, showing the actual circumstances and detailed histories of individuals and their relationships would suggest that such particulars, which are always present (as we know from our own personal experiences), are also always crucial to the constitution of experience. Third, reconstructing people's arguments about, justifications for, and interpretations of what they and others are doing would explain how social life proceeds. It would show that although the terms of their discourses may be set (and, as in any society, include several sometimes contradictory and often historically changing discourses), within these limits, people contest interpretations of what is happening, strategize, feel pain, and live their lives. In one sense this is not so new. Bourdieu (1977), for example, theorizes about social practice in a similar way. But the difference here would be that one would be seeking textual means of representing how this happens rather than simply making theoretical assertions that it does.

By focusing closely on particular individuals and their changing relationships, one would necessarily subvert the most problematic connotations of culture: homogeneity, coherence, and timelessness.

[...]

NOTES

- 1 *Halfies* is a term I borrowed from Kirin Narayan (personal communication).
- 2 Likewise, Marcus and Clifford (1985) and Marcus and Fischer (1986) gesture toward feminists as important sources of cultural and anthropological critique but do not discuss their work. Fischer (1984, 1986, 1988), however, has long been interested in the phenomenon of biculturality.
- 3 It is still rare for anthropologists in this society or others to do what Laura Nader (1969) advocated many years ago – to “study up.”
- 4 Its various strategies are based on this division and the series of oppositions (culture/nature, public/private, work/home, transcendence/immediacies, abstract/particular, objectivity/subjectivity, autonomy/connectedness, etc.) associated with it: (a) women should be allowed to join the valued men's world, to become like men or have their privileges, (b) women's values and work, even if different, should be as valued as men's, or (c) women and men should both change and enter each other's spheres so that gender differences are erased.
- 5 It does not, Harding adds, dissolve feminism as a political identity, but the most pressing issue in feminist circles now is how to develop a politics of solidarity, coalition, or affinity built on the recognition of difference rather than the solidarity of a unitary self defined by its opposition to an other which had formerly defined it as other. The most interesting thinking on this subject has been Haraway's (1985).
- 6 For a discussion of the convergence of anthropological and feminist critiques of objectivity, see Abu-Lughod (1990a).
- 7 In his 1988 address to the American Anthropological Association, Edward Said's central point was that anthropologists had to attend not just to “the anthropological site” but to the “cultural situation in which anthropological work is in fact done” (1989: 212).
- 8 Much of the literature on indigenous anthropology is taken up with the advantages and disadvantages of this identification. See Fahim (1982) and Altorki and El-Solh (1988).
- 9 See also my discussion of the study of gender in Middle East anthropology (L. Abu-Lughod 1989).
- 10 In parallel fashion, those who study the black experience are thought of as studying a marked form of experience. It could be pointed out, and has been by such figures as Adrienne Rich, that the universal unmarked form of experience from which it differs is itself partial. It is the experience of whiteness.
- 11 Crapanzano (1977) has written insightfully about the regular process of distancing from the fieldwork experience and building identifications with the anthropological audience that all anthropologists go through when they return from the field.
- 12 This is happening, for example, in heated debates in the field of Middle East women's studies about who has the right to speak for Middle Eastern women.
- 13 Some would like to make distinctions between “womanism” and “feminism,” but in much of literature they blur together.
- 14 Arens (1979), for example, has asked the provocative question of why anthropologists cling so tenaciously to the belief that in some cultures cannibalism is an accepted ritual practice, when the evidence (in the form of eye witness accounts) is so meager (if not, as he argues, absent).
- 15 In my own work on an Egyptian Bedouin community I began to think in terms of discourses rather than culture simply because I had to find ways to make sense of the fact that there seemed to be two contradictory discourses on interpersonal relations – the discourse of honor and modesty and the poetic

discourse of vulnerability and attachment – which informed and were used by the same individuals in differing contexts (Abu-Lughod 1986). In a recent reflection on Bedouin responses to death (Abu-Lughod n.d.), I also had to make sense of the fact that there were multiple discourses on death in this community. Not only did people play with contradictory explanations of particular deaths (invoking, in one case of an accidental killing, stupidity, certain actions on the part of family members, the [evil] eye, fate, and God's will), but the two primary discourses – ritual funerary laments and the Islamic discourse of God's will – were attached to different social groups, men and women, and worked to sustain and justify the power differences between them.

- 16 Two new journals, *Public Culture: Bulletin of the Center for Transnational Cultural Studies* and *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, provide forums for discussion of these transnational issues.
- 17 For evidence of a "world system" in the thirteenth century, see J. Abu-Lughod (1989).
- 18 Dumont (1986) has recently reiterated this, declaring changes in social theory to be merely methodological changes.
- 19 For a more detailed and interesting discussion of Clifford's unease with feminism, see Gordon (1988).
- 20 To this list could be added many others, including most recently Friedl (1989).
- 21 My own experiment in this sort of narrative ethnography is forthcoming (Abu-Lughod, in press).

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