My Best Informant's Dress: The Erotic Equation in Fieldwork

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Malinowski's "Sex-Sickness"

"Aren't there any anthropologist jokes?" asked a doctor friend of my mother's, who had just entertained a table of lunch buddies at their retirement community with a series of doctor gags. To my mother's disappointment, I couldn't think of even one. I do have a poor memory for jokes, but a quick survey of my peers revealed that we are not given to either wit or thigh-slapping when it comes to the practice of our trade. The only anthropologist to deliver was my friend and former mentor David Schneider, who came up with this one: "A postmodern anthropologist and his informant[1] are talking; finally the informant says, 'Okay, enough about you, now let's talk about me.' "[2]

Retelling this joke I realized one reason it struck me as funny was its similarity to a recent television ad. A young man and woman, postmodern looking in their tight black clothes and spiked hair, are chatting at a party, and she says to him, "Okay, now let's talk about you; what do *you* think of my dress?"

Not only did Schneider's joke suggest a certain absurdity in the so-called reflexivity discourse, but its kinship with the suggestive commercial inspired me to wonder why the postmodern scrutiny of the relation between informant, researcher, and text is limited to who is talking or even what is said. What else is going on between fieldworker and informant? Is "the romance of anthropology" only a manner of speaking?

In their germinal article contrasting postmodernism and feminism in anthropology, Frances E. Mascia-Lees et al. "see a romantic yearning to know the 'other' " behind the reflexive "turn" (1989:25–26). But, rather than leading on to the obvious erotic possibilities, they circle back within the metaphor:

> Traditionally, this romantic component has been linked to the heroic quests, by the single anthropologist, for "his soul," through confrontation with the exotic "other" . . . in turning inward, making himself, his motives, and his experience the thing to be confronted, the postmodernist anthropologist locates the "other" in himself. [Mascia-Lees et al. 1989:25–26]

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Following Mascia-Lees et al.'s suggestions to be "suspicious of relationships with 'others' that do not include a close and honest scrutiny of the motivations for research" (1989:33), I am going to ask an embarrassing question. Is all this romance totally sublimated in field notes and language learning only to emerge in texts as a metaphor for the "heroic quest by the single anthropologist," or does the erotic ever make a human gesture? If so, what might be the significance of the erotic equation in fieldwork and its representation or lack thereof in ethnographic texts?

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Rarely is the erotic subjectivity or experience of the anthropologist discussed in public venues or written about for publication. If this omission is not due to any plot or conspiracy, neither is it incidental. In the dominant schematic that has set the terms of discourse, the distanced neutral observer presented in traditional anthropological texts is at the opposite pole from the sexually aroused (repelled? ambivalent?) fieldworker. By not "problematizing" (dreadful word, but none other works as well here) *his* own sexuality in his texts, the anthropologist makes *male* gender and *heterosexuality* the cultural givens, the unmarked categories. If straight men choose not to explore how their sexuality and gender may affect their perspective, privilege, and power in the field, women and gays, less credible by definition, are suspended between our urgent sense of difference and our justifiable fear of revealing it.

In graduate school in the early 1960s, I learned—because it was never mentioned—that erotic interest between fieldworker and informant either didn't exist, would be inappropriate, or couldn't be mentioned; I had no idea which. The anthropologist was pictured as a man who would, ideally, bring his wife to the field as company and helper. That she would absorb his sexual interests was, I suppose, understood. I knew that Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict had done fieldwork, of course, but the former seemed always to be married to another anthropologist, and the latter—whose "private" life was opaque—appears to have spent little time there.[3] If single male fieldworkers were thought by our male professors to engage in, or even refrain from engaging in, any sexual activities, these were never discussed in front of me. And this being the case, how could the sexuality of female fieldworkers ever emerge as an issue?

The black hole enveloping this nonsubject in most anthropological writing invites one of two conclusions: either desire is to be firmly squelched—even though many of us are (or were) young, unattached, and living in lonely, isolated situations for months at a time—or it should be satisfied away from the glare of the published account, cordoned off from legitimate ethnography. A recent comprehensive guide to conducting fieldwork (Ellen 1984) has no index heading under "sexuality." From Casagrande's ground-breaking collection, *In the Company of Man* (1960), to the 1989 *In the Field* (Smith and Kornblum), when a fieldworker writes in the first person, she or he thinks and sometimes feels, but never

actually lusts or loves. Most guides ward off desire with vague warnings against getting "too involved," hardly daring to admit that fieldworkers and informants do and must get involved emotionally.[4]

Between the lines lurk certain shadowy givens. The straight male anthropologist's "best informants" are likely to be, or at least to be represented as, male, presumably minimizing the danger of these key relationships becoming eroticized.[5] On the other hand, a veil of professional silence covers the face of indulgence toward men's casual sex with women in the field. For instance, the fieldwork guide mentioned earlier with no index heading for "sexuality" may allude to it coyly in a discussion of why anthropologists tend to "get so much more out of their first than out of subsequent fieldwork." Among other factors is the suggestion that "when anthropologists first go into the field they are often single" (Ellen 1984:98).

Most "reflexive" anthropology, which explicitly spotlights how ethnographic knowledge is produced, has rendered sex and emotion between ethnographers and informants more abstract than before. The exceptions show a pattern: Briggs (1970) and Myerhoff (1978), who do make their subjectivity gendered and grounded, are women; of three men who come to my mind, Murphy (1987) was disabled, and Rosaldo (1989) is Chicano. So far, the only white, able-bodied, and, one is led to infer, heterosexual male who writes as if he knows this affected his fieldwork is Michael Moffatt (1989).[6]

Generally, practitioners of "new ethnography" have used *metaphors* of emotion and sexuality to express their ethnographic angst. Vincent Crapanzano (1980:134) likens his quest for knowledge of the Moroccans to a "belief in total sexual possession," and acknowledges that "passion and science are not in fact so easily separable" without grounding this observation in flesh.[7] And despite James Clifford's (1986:13–14) observation that "excessive pleasures" and "desire" have been absent from traditional ethnography, these topics remain equally absent from the articles in *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986). Why are emotion and sexuality less important or less implicated in what Clifford calls the "relations of production" (Clifford 1986:13) of ethnography than are race and colonialism? And if the absence of odor, which played a large part in travel writing (Clifford 1986:11), leaves ethnography at best stale and at worst deodorized, what does the absence of an erotic dimension do?

Historian John Boswell (1992) recently advocated the contemplation of social margins both for their own beauty—he invoked the medieval manuscript page—and to advance our knowledge of the text. In anthropology, *only* the margins—marginal texts, the margins of more legitimate texts, or the work of socially marginal members of the profession—can tell us why we signify or squelch the erotics of fieldwork. By looking at *who* has written about sexuality in the field and *how* they have written about it, I will ask why the erotic dimension is absent from the anthropological canon, and after offering an example from my fieldwork, I will argue for its future inclusion.

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As far as I know, only two white heterosexual men belonging to what Geertz (1988:73–101) termed the "I-Witnessing" literary genre of ethnography have problematized themselves as "positioned [sexual] subjects"[8] by writing about sexual encounters with women in the field.[9] The revered ethnographer Bronislaw Malinowski was one of the few anthropologists to write *about* the sexuality of a non-Western people (*Sex and Repression in Savage Society,* 1955), and in his private diary, in Polish (*A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term,* 1967), he detailed his *own* sexual subjectivity, a persistent and painful struggle against "lewd" and "impure" fantasies about Trobriand and missionary women, whom he "pawed" and perhaps more (the *Diary* was censored by Malinowski's widow before publication).

Not only was an exemplary "competent and experienced ethnographer" (Geertz 1988:79) caught with his pants down, so to speak, but if anthropology's historic political agenda has been "to secure a recognition that the non-Western is as crucial an element of the human as the Western" (Mascia-Lees et al. 1989:8), why was Malinowski thinking of Trobrianders, including objects of his ambivalent lust, as "niggers"?

The anthropological honchos who reviewed the *Diary* defended, dismissed, or gloated over it within a common and familiar frame of reference: "These diaries do not add in any significant way to our knowledge of Malinowski as a social scientist. They do, however, tell us a good deal about Malinowski as a person" (Gorer 1967:311).[10] Malinowski's sexuality, his physical health, his bigotry toward the Trobrianders, and his insecurity as a fieldworker were private matters subsumed in the concept "person," which had—or should have had—nothing to do with Malinowski the public "social scientist." Underlying all the reviews is the belief that human beings can be sorted into "lower" and "higher" parts corresponding to self-consciousness and consciousness, emotions and intellect, body and soul. Of course Malinowski shared these same assumptions—Geertz (1967) noticed a similarity between the *Diary* and "Puritan tract," and Geoffrey Gorer compared Malinowski to "the desert Fathers, [who are] tempted by devils," and likened the *Diary* to "spiritual confessions, with the same person being both the penitent and the priest" (1967:311). The hostile and dismissive reactions of the reviewers suggest even less tolerance in scientific dualism for the "lower" aspects of human experience than there had been in its Christian version. Ian Hogbin (1968:575) fumed that the *Diary* was concerned with nothing but "trivia" and believed it should never have been published.

At the time, only Clifford Geertz realized the profound significance of the *Diary* for the anthropological enterprise.[11] The gap between Malinowski the "person" and Malinowski the "social scientist" revealed by the *Diary* was indeed "shattering" to the "self-congratulatory" image of anthropology (Geertz 1967:12). But for Geertz, Malinowski was all the more admirable because, "through a mysterious transformation wrought by science" (1967:13), he had

heroically transcended his bad attitude and lack of empathy toward the Trobrianders to become a "great ethnographer."

Twenty years later, Geertz looked back and saw in the publication of this "backstage masterpiece" (1988:75) the first signs of the profound disquiet revealed in "new ethnography" and "the breakdown of epistemological (and moral) confidence" (1988:22) in postmodern anthropology. Although Malinowski had turned his cultural pockets inside out in a diary he could bring himself neither to publish nor to destroy, the postmodernists have made "I-Witnessing" central to their legitimate texts. But the unpleasantly corporeal body in Malinowski's diary has become, in deconstructionist thought, a more comfortable "metaphor of the body" (Bordo 1990). Admitting that there is no objective location outside the body from which to transcend culture, postmodernists in and out of anthropology have conceived of the body as a "trickster" of *"indeterminate sex and changeable gender"* (Smith-Rosenberg 1985:291, emphasis added) whose

> unity has been shattered by the choreography of multiplicity. . . . Deconstructionist readings that enact this protean fantasy are continually "slip-slidin' away"; through paradox, inversion, self-subversion, facile and intricate textual dance, they . . . *refuse to assume a shape for which they must take responsibility*. [Bordo 1990:144, emphasis added]

Postmodern anthropologists are taking upon themselves one part of the white man's burden—the power to name the "other"—but they still do not want to shoulder the responsibility for their erotic and social power in the field, possibly, as Mascia Lees et al. (1989) have argued, because they are not enthusiastic about the insights of feminism. Paul Rabinow, who has explicitly rejected a feminist perspective (Mascia-Lees et al. 1989:18), published—though not in his principal ethnography—an account of his one-night stand with a Moroccan woman thoughtfully provided by a male informant (1977:63–69). Most of Rabinow's description is disingenuously offhanded and is made to seem—despite the unexplored admission that this was "the best single day I was to spend in Morocco"—primarily about validating his manhood to male Moroccans while fending off "haunting super-ego images of my anthropologist persona" (1977:63–69).

Several women anthropologists have told me that they read Rabinow's account as a self-important admission, basically boasting, about what is really standard operating procedure for male fieldworkers. Very likely, one of the models for the "haunting super-ego images" that interfered with Rabinow's pleasure was Clifford Geertz. In his brilliant analysis of postmodern texts by (male)[12] anthropologists, Geertz specifically interprets this episode as part of Rabinow's literary strategy to show himself as a "pal, comrade, companion" type of fieldworker. Just in case we might hope that Geertz's thinking had evolved beyond Malinowski's in the sexual department, he dismisses the woman involved as a "wanton" (1988:93).

Progressives who want to transform the cruel, oppressive Judeo-Christian sexual system and the correlated "objectivist" power grid that both entraps and privileges white heterosexual men should not condemn Malinowski or Rabinow

for writing explicitly about the sexual subjectivity they struggled against or indulged in. It is just because silence regarding the unwritten rules of the sex and gender systems makes changing the rules impossible that hardly any of the powerful, or those who hope to be, are willing to break them. As the issues crystallize out of our history, we must begin to acknowledge eroticism, our own and that of others, if we are to reflect on its meaning for our work, and perhaps help alter our cultural system for the better.

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Changing the gender and/or sexual orientation and probably the race[13] of either fieldworker or informant modifies the terms of the erotic equation. The sexuality of heterosexual men—however much a puzzle or pain on a personal level—is the cultural "ego," the assumed subjectivity; and it was predictable that women and gays, for whom matters of sexuality and gender can never be unproblematic, have begun to address these issues for the discipline as a whole.[14]

Quite a few women anthropologists of undisclosed sexual orientation have written about *not* having sex with men where apparently even being seen as (hetero)sexual meant losing all credibility, risking personal danger, and the catastrophic failure of their fieldwork projects. As Peggy Golde put it, women anthropologists have felt compelled to "surround [themselves] with symbolic 'chaperones' " (1970:7). Working in South America, Mary Ellen Conaway restricted her freedom of movement and wore "odd-looking, loose-fitting clothing, no makeup, and flat-soled shoes" to prevent the local men from getting any wrong ideas (1986:59, 60). Maureen Giovannini warded off Sicilian men by "dressing conservatively and carrying a large notebook whenever I left the house" (1986:110).

"Manda Cesara" (1982) is the only woman I know about who has written for publication, although under a pseudonym, and not in an ethnographic text "proper," about desiring and having sex with male informants. Unlike the male anthropologists, she neither retreated into abstraction nor narrated her erotic experience as a causal notch on the bedpost:

> To lay hold of a culture through one's love of one individual may be an illusion, but there can be no doubt that love became a fundamental relation of my thoughts and perceptions to both, the world of the Lenda and myself. . . . Douglas opened for me the gate to Lenda. I don't mean that he introduced me to his friends. I mean that he opened my heart and mind. [Cesara 1982:59–61]

The male Africans' so-called natural attitude toward heterosexual intercourse and extramarital affairs buttressed "Cesara's" doubts about the Judeo-Christian system. And, in the midst of a long reflection beginning with "sexuality is a cultural system" (1982:146) but veering off into a discussion of what is wrong with Western culture as measured by the prevalence of male homosexuality, she adds: "The Lenda, thank heaven, and I am speaking selfishly, are beautifully heterosexual" (1982:147). Although "Cesara's" homophobia upset me[15]—straights are still holding us accountable for "causing" the decline of the Roman Empire—I do hope to read more bold papers and books like hers in which the erotic dimension of power and knowledge is openly acknowledged.

For years the pages of *SOLGAN*,[16] the quarterly newsletter of the Society of Lesbian and Gay Anthropologists, have been enlivened by accounts of (mostly) male homosexuality in far-flung parts of the world; many of these brief accounts include a note on the fieldworker's sexual orientation, and a few have implied participation.[17] Walter Williams, in *The Spirit and the Flesh* (1986), was clear that his being gay gave him access to the Plains Indian *berdaches* (1986:105), and suggests that intimate relations enabled his knowledge (see, especially, 1986:93).[18]

The anthropologist who has most lyrically expressed eroticism toward the "other" is Kenneth Read, in his work on the Gahuku-Gama of New Guinea.[19] In *Return to the High Valley* (1986), Read—in hot pursuit of honesty about fieldwork and that elusive emotional dimension to ethnographic texts—scales the barbed wire fencing between emotion and ethnography. "I have the greatest affection for . . . [the Gahuku-Gama]," he writes, adding, "I have never known why this admission generates suspicion" (1986:ix, x). That this attraction is, or borders on, homoerotic desire is signaled in code words that are understood by both gay and straight: "Lest anyone begin to feel uneasy at the possibility of being exposed to embarrassment, I assure the more sensitive members of my profession that I will not *flaunt this personal ingredient like a banner*" (1986:x, emphasis added).[20]

Yet such is the intensity of Read's attachment, and so insistent that he winds up doing a kind of literary striptease, first putting out disclaimers to alert the "more sensitive members of my profession" (1986:x), then revealing what had just been hidden. Read's "best informant," and the man who "may be said to have invited me there," was Makis, "an influential man in the tribe" (1986:11). Although Read reassures his readers that "propriety restrains me from revealing the full depth of my affective bond to him" (1986:12), he throws propriety to the winds, it seems to me, in his subsequent description of remembering, 30 years after the fact, Makis' coming into his (Read's) room,

> emerging with a marvelous physical solidity into the circle of light cast by my lamp, all the planes of his chest, his face, his abdomen and thighs chiseled from black and shining marble, his lips lifted upward with the natural pride of an aristocracy owing nothing to the accidents of birth, and his eyes holding mine with the implications of at least a partial understanding neither of us could express in words. [1986:75][21]

Following in Read's footsteps (but with banners flaunting), I offer an account—perhaps the first to describe a relationship between a lesbian anthropologist and her female "best informant"[22]—of the emotional and erotic equation in my own recent fieldwork.[23]

Kay

My fieldwork experience has been fraught with sexual dangers and attractions that were much more like leitmotifs than light distractions. To begin with, the fact that I am a gay woman has disposed *me*—the great majority of gay anthropologists work with heterosexuals and avoid sexual topics—to work with

other gay people (a correspondence that heterosexuals observe more often than we gays do, albeit wih the unexamined privilege of the powerful).[24] I was not looking for sexual adventure in the field. Cultural, political, and psychological factors more than eroticism have determined my affinity for gays as research subjects—for one thing I have worked with more gay men than women. Looking back, I used my first fieldwork among gay people, mostly male, to consolidate a fragile and imperiled gay identity. Prospective dissertation projects in East Africa and Fiji—again I stress I am not speaking *for* gay fieldworkers but *as* one—presented unknown dangers that scared me off. Most closeted gay people—as I then was—manage information and stress in America by retreating to private or secret "gay zones" where, alone and with other gays, we can "be ourselves." No African or Fijian village would offer such refuge, I figured, and what if they found me out? Bringing my then-lover to an exotic field locale was never imaginable, and the prospect of living for months without physical and emotional intimacy was too bleak.[25]

So, by the "erotic dimension," I mean, first, that my gay informants and I shared a very important background assumption that our social arrangements reflected—that women are attracted to women and men to men. Second, the very fact that I *have* worked with other gays means that, like straight colleagues, some of the people who were objects of my research were also potential sexual partners, and vice versa. Partly because of this, my key informants and sponsors have usually been more to me than an expedient way of getting information, and something different from "just" friends. Information has always flowed to me in a medium

Figure 1
Kay at a Grove costume party in the 1950s. Collection of Esther Newton.

of emotion—ranging from passionate (although unconsummated) erotic attachment to profound affection to lively interest—that empowers me in my projects and, when it is reciprocated, helps motivate informants to put up with my questions and intrusions.

I had thought of writing an ethnohistory of the gay and lesbian community of Cherry Grove several months before I met Kay, having become attached to the *place*—a summer resort on Fire Island about 45 miles from New York City—during the previous summer. Career pressures and political commitment were behind the initial decision. I needed a second big field experience and book to advance professionally. Also, from the outset I intended to write for New York's huge gay communities, in whose evolution Cherry Grove had, I suspected, played a starring role.[26]

But not everyone who sets sail keeps afloat—or catches the wind. A great deal of the lift I needed in the field when I was becalmed or swamped came through my love for two elderly Grove women, and because of them the work was suffused with emotion and meaning. Two years after starting fieldwork I de-

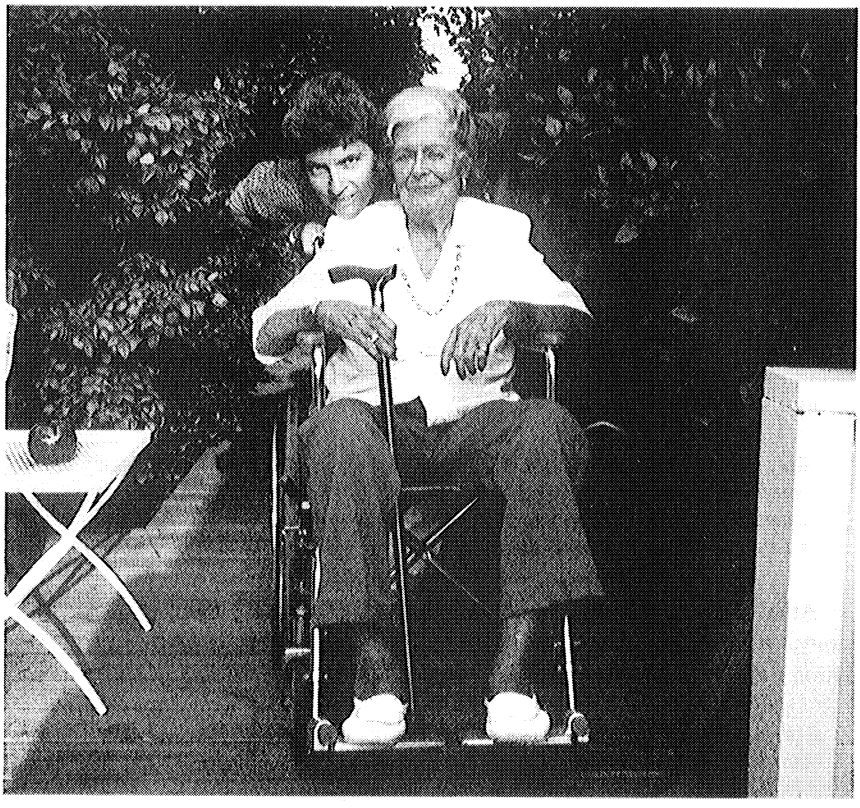

Figure 2
Kay and the author on Kay's deck, 1988. Photo by Diane Quero. Collection of Esther Newton.

scribed them in my notes as "the sun and the moon of my love affair with Cherry Grove—without them there would be neither heat nor light in me to pursue and embrace my subject." (Ruth) Peter Worth became my Grove cicerone, my close friend, and my confidant; I was in love with Kay.[27]

Kay was an old-timer I should meet, Grovers said. After several weeks I matched the name with a dignified and classy looking old woman who rode around the boardwalks in an electric cart. Like most able-bodied people, I had looked through her out of misplaced politeness and because of her advanced age. When I did introduce myself, I got more than I had hoped for: a warm and impulsive invitation for a drink at her cottage. That evening I wrote about[28] my first encounter:

> Kay lives in a tiny, charming white house, the deck full of potted flowers. I found her shuffling (she moves precariously by advancing each foot a few inches ahead of the other) to get me a drink of juice and complaining that her hair wasn't done—she hates that. Despite wrinkles and thinning hair, she still pulls off a look.
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> She told me unsentimentally how infirm she was—the hearing aid, the contact lenses, the inability to read, a slipped disk she was too old to have fused—and how she hated to be one of those complaining elderly. . . . Emphysema makes her wheeze painfully with every movement. (She still smokes: "I don't inhale, dear. Please—it's my only vice, the only one I have left.")
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> Was it because I liked her cottage which still had the diminutive charm of an earlier Cherry Grove, because I found her beautiful and her suffering poignant, or because her allusions to past vices intrigued me? Or was it because she called me "dear," that I came away enchanted?

Several hours after writing my field notes, too elated to sleep, I wrote to David Schneider (1 July 1986): "The more I get into the history, the harder hold Cherry Grove has on my imagination. . . . I'm embarking, and thrilled about it." And then, feeling more confident and confiding than I had as his closeted graduate student when I was doing fieldwork with female impersonators (Newton 1979) and my "best informant" was a gay man (whom I also adored),[29] I plunged on:

> This morning I introduced myself to a woman of eighty plus whom I'd been wanting to meet, as she rolled toward me in her electric cart. Not only was she receptive, she clasped my arm in an intimate embrace and practically pulled me into her lap while we talked . . . and my heart quite turned over. Such are the perils of fieldwork.

After that I went by Kay's cottage every day, and as I talked to other community members, my fascination with her grew. I discovered her powers of seduction were legendary. As one Grove woman told me:

> Kay was the first one to walk into the Waldorf and say, "Send me a bottle and a blonde." She's a law unto herself; don't think you can compare her to the average lesbian. She could walk into the Taj Mahal and people would think she was the owner.

This triggered the following reflection in me, only weeks after our first meeting:

> Seeing Kay now, crippled and gasping for breath, I still can imagine it, remembering how her ex-lover Leslie came in and threw her arms around Kay saying, "Oh Kay, we had some great times on this couch!" and Kay's enormous blue eyes light up to go with the smile —the expensive dentures gleaming—the gesture of a devilish flirt.

The work progressed around and through my crush on Kay. She helped me organize a group of old-timers to reminisce about the Grove, and I followed up in a burst of energy with individual interviews. And despite her often expressed fear that my book would reveal to an unsuspecting world that the Grove was a gay haven, she became ever more helpful. Six weeks later,

> we had an intense five minutes of smiling at each other. On my way out I gave her my number out here and said "If there's ever a problem, don't hesitate to call me," and she seemed very pleased, and asked if she could do anything for me. I said yes, "Show me your pictures, tell me about the people." She agreed.

That winter I returned to my teaching job. I spoke to Kay by phone, and in April I picked her up at her Park Avenue apartment for a lunch date. By then our pattern of flirtation and teasing was established. "Back then Kay, did you get who you wanted?" I asked, as she was insisting on paying for our pricey meal with her American Express Gold Card. "Yes," she smiled, "and lots of them." She told me that she still got sexual urges but just waited for them to pass. We both flirted with the idea of making love. "Someday I'm going to surprise the hell out of you and really kiss you back," she said once gleefully.

Two summers after meeting Kay, the fieldwork project was cresting, and although it was tacitly settled that her physical pain and chronic illness precluded sex and we would not actually become lovers, our daily visits were affectionate and full of erotic byplay. On 11 July 1988, I wrote:

> I don't remember now when I used to sit *facing* Kay across the round coffee table. Probably even that first summer I began to sit next to her on the Naugahyde (so practical for the beach) orange couch, partly because she generally hears me if I speak about six inches from her right ear, and mostly just to get closer. In the last weeks my visits have taken a new pattern. I arrive, I kiss her quickly on the lips and find out what she needs from the store—then I return. Now comes the real visit.

During the "real visit," when she felt up to it, Kay repeated stories about her past life, her many lovers, her marriages, and the major and minor characters in Cherry Grove's history. I sat enthralled as she recited verses from poems of Edna St. Vincent Millay—she had known the poet—which I guessed had been part of her seduction repertoire. And although I could never persuade her to leave her letters and papers to a university library, she did allow me to copy many valuable photographs and newspaper clippings. She also continued to help me gain access to other old-timers. When I asked Kay to tell one Grover who had resisted an interview "What a 'good guy' I am," she answered smiling, "Oh I tell that to everybody." I observed later:

> Millions couldn't buy this goodwill. No one's word means more than Kay's to the old-timers here, and she has given me her trust freely. I know Kay's affection has

never been compelled or bought. She just likes me, and the beauty of it is I adore her even though I need her and have ulterior professional motives.

Kay never had to say "Now let's talk about me" because she rarely asked me about my own life. She was used to being the center of attention, even though she was acutely and painfully aware that her friends—me included—sometimes found her conversation boring because she didn't remember what she had told to whom, couldn't get out, didn't hear gossip, and was so preoccupied with her physical problems. But even on days when Kay had no new story, no information or photograph to offer, I enjoyed being with her:

> What's deep about her is almost all non-verbal. It's her bodily presence, bearing—still—and that emotional force, crushing and liquid like an ocean wave. . . . Kay once told me that driving out to the Grove with two other lesbians on a cloudy day she had raised her arms to the sky and intoned "Clouds Go Away, Sun Come Out" several times. Within minutes the clouds split and the sun came out. Kay showed me how the other two women turned around and looked at her incredulously from the front seat. In another culture Kay would have been some kind of priestess.

Her stories and our mutual affection constantly led me back to the work:

> The more I think about Kay allowing herself to be seduced in the girls' school the more her life connection to the history I am helping to construct excites me. Kay's beauty and presence would have made me crazy in her younger days, but I wonder if—because she was a party girl rather than an intellectual—I could have loved her deeply. But now, instead of *having* ideas she *embodies* ideas. Kay spans almost the entire period from "smashing" and romantic friendship to the age of AIDS, *On Our Backs* and dyke separatism. When I kiss her I am kissing 1903.

My love affair with Kay and with Cherry Grove culminated in her 85th birthday celebrations in 1988—which also marked her 50th summer as a Grover. At her small birthday party, I was proud that her hand on my knee proved she could still attract women. I was her escort at a Cherry Grove theater performance dedicated to "Kay our national institution." Until the day, a year later, Kay had what quickly proved to be a fatal heart attack, our loving relationship continued. To Grovers, Kay's death symbolized "the end of an era"; to many of us, her loss was also a personal one. My fieldwork suddenly felt more finished than it had before, and I decided not to return to Cherry Grove.

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This would have been a very different essay had I set out to "decide" whether ethical and strategic considerations should constrain anthropologists from having sexual relationships with informants. If we are to believe that only those who publicly confess to it are tempted, then, "Manda Cesara" aside, women fieldworkers' vulnerability as women rules out (hetero)sex. In print, and probably much more so in life, the men feel freer. Malinowski struggled for re-

straint to keep *himself* pure, and Rabinow saw no ethical difficulty in his sexual behavior in the field. Yet it is hard to see why, if our power as anthropologists to name the subordinated "other" poses an ethical problem, the power to "screw" them doesn't. (Most of our English sexual vocabulary implies domination to begin with.) I doubt that a way out of this problem will be found if it is posed in these terms. But if "the burden of authorship cannot be evaded," as Geertz suggests (1988:140), then neither can the burden of being, and being seen as, an erotic creature.

In my own case, there was no higher status to take advantage of in buying or attracting sexual partners. Almost all my informants were, like me, American, white, and at least middle class. Although some Grovers were apprehensive about what I might write, few were impressed by my being a scholar, and plenty of Grove men considered themselves my superior because of my gender. I was far from being above Kay; in Cherry Grove's lexicon, she was a wealthy homeowner and longtime community icon, whereas I was a passing blip, a newcomer, and a lowly renter. Unquestionably, her regard enhanced my status far more than the reverse. Since our loving relationship never became defined as an affair, my *strategic* anxieties about possible "complications" from becoming sexually involved with a beloved member of a small face-to-face community were never put to the test. Those fears did advise caution (as did the fact that we both had somewhat absent longtime companions—that is another story), but for Kay, too, my guess is, the sexual attraction was more compelling than "having sex," and much safer than "having an affair."

As a child who was more comfortable with adults than with other kids, I've often been attracted to older people as friends, advisers, and, in adulthood, as lovers, so it's predictable that the work of writing gay history seduced me and kept me enchanted through Kay, who had lived and created it. If Kay had not existed I might have had to invent her. For me, intellectual and creative work, including fieldwork and the writing of ethnography, has always been inspired by, and addressed to, an interior audience of loved ones like informants and mentors. The most intense attractions have generated the most creative energy, as if the work were a form of courting and seduction.

What *Kay* got was an admirer 40 years younger who could run errands, set up appointments, move garden furniture, bring friends by, flirt, and who genuinely wanted to know and hear who her friends had been and what their common experience had meant to her. Kay had other devoted friends who helped with some of the problems that old age brings. Perhaps my unique gift was erotic admiration, which must have brought her vital powers back into focus amid the dissolution caused by failing mental and physical strength. Eroticism energized the project—which caught Kay's imagination—of giving her old age shape and meaning by recording the journey of her generation in Cherry Grove, and seeing it as connected to my own life.[30]

This manner of working poses the danger of "uncritically adopting Kay's point of view," as one of the *Cultural Anthropology* readers and two colleagues who have read drafts of *Cherry Grove, Fire Island* (in press), my forthcoming

ethnohistory of the community, have warned. But until we are more honest about how we feel about informants we can't try to compensate for, incorporate, or acknowledge desire and repulsion in our analysis of subjects or in our discourse about text construction. We are also refusing to reproduce one of the mightiest vocabularies in the human language.

Philosophy, psychology, and literature have reflected on how creativity may be powered and shaped by Eros—invoking both the glorious and the terrible powers of the winged god, not the debased sweetness of the cuddly Cupid—even if anthropology has not. "The lover is turned to the great sea of beauty," Diotima tells Socrates, in that touchstone of Western meditation on eros, the *Symposium,* "and, gazing upon this, he gives birth to many gloriously beautiful ideas and theories, in unstinting love of wisdom" (Plato 1989:58). Freud's theory of sublimation reinterprets Plato's encomium of eros, albeit darkened by Judeo-Christian pessimism. And in a novel by May Sarton, the lesbian protagonist declares:

> When I said that all poems are love poems, I meant that the motor power, the electric current is love of one kind or another. The subject may be something quite impersonal—a bird on a window sill, a cloud in the sky, a tree. [1965:123]

Or the subject might be a culture, a people, a symbolic system. Of course ethnographic texts are not poems, and neither are they diaries. Whatever *motivates* them, their *purpose* should be "enabling conversation over societal lines—of ethnicity, religion, class, gender, language, race—that have grown progressively more nuanced" (Geertz 1988:147). The erotic dimension intersects with those lines; to follow Malinowski's lead by including the sexuality of "our" people among the topics worthy of publication,[31] we will have to surpass him and describe, not just in Polish, but also in English—in "I-Witnessing" or any other authorial style of "being there"—where we anthropologists, as encultured individuals like all other humans, are "coming from." In the age of Anita Hill and AIDS, can we do less?

Notes

Acknowledgments. An earlier version of this article was read at the "Lesbian/Gay Identity" Session, Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Sunday, 1 December 1990, New Orleans. Without the support of my colleagues in SOLGA (Society of Lesbian and Gay Anthropologists) who loved the earlier draft, I wouldn't have had the nerve to try for publication. I would also like to thank Julie Abraham, two anonymous readers for *Cultural Anthropology,* Amber Hollibaugh, Morris Kaplan, Ellen Lewin, Sherry Ortner, Jane Rosett, David M. Schneider, Kath Weston, and Peter Worth, all of whom read drafts of this article and made helpful suggestions. "Sex Sickness" is Marvin Harris's (1967:72) term from his review of Malinowski's *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term* (1967).

[1]One of my informants, Peter Worth, was shocked by reading here the word *informant* in reference to herself and her friends. I explained that in all my published work on Cherry

Grove I intend to use the word *narrator* for those whom I had interviewed, but in this essay, I was addressing an anthropological audience for whom the historical importance of the word informant recommended its use.

[2]David Schneider said he had heard this joke from Marshall Sahlins. Later, Kath Weston pointed out that Judy Stacey (1990:272) had quoted a slightly different version, attributing it to a forthcoming paper of Sahlins's, "The Return of the Event, Again," in *Clio in Oceania* (in press).

[3]I think it was only in the later 1960s that I heard rumors that Mead lived with another woman who was thought to be her lover. Partly I doubted it because she had been so publicly and often married, and partly the news had less impact because being more settled in myself, I needed it less. Much more important to my survival—I mean that quite literally—from high school on, was the forceful advocacy for human variation, gender and otherwise, in both Mead's and Benedict's work.

In the acceptance speech he had planned to give upon receiving the Margaret Mead Award at our 1991 Annual Meeting in Chicago—very unfortunately the awards format precluded speeches—Will Roscoe (1992) expressed the hope that if Benedict and Mead were still living they would not have to hide their sexuality to be credible public advocates for greater tolerance.

[4]"Personal interactions and relationships are the stuff of field data collection," asserts sociologist Carol A. B. Warren (1977:105) in an excellent article on fieldwork in the male gay world; however, she ends mysteriously, "they only become a problem when they block access to certain parts of the data." She astutely discusses how the researcher may be stigmatized as gay by "normals" and so lose credibility, how the fieldworker trying to establish trust may be grilled by informants about her own sexual orientation, and even the need for "reflective subjectivity" by the fieldworker (1977:104)—all without ever tipping her own hand. This is the same elusiveness to which I resorted in my own published work on gay men (Newton 1979).

[5]Only one of the male anthropologists in *In the Company of Man* chose to write about a female informant—a pre-pubescent girl (Conklin 1960).

[6]Jean Briggs (1970) made her own anger and frustration central to her Eskimo ethnography; Barbara Myerhoff's (1978) elderly Jewish informants got under her skin in a rich variety of ways; Robert Murphy's (1987) account of how becoming paralyzed changed his identity and propelled him toward studying the disabled moved me deeply; Renato Rosaldo (1989) explored how his wife Shelly's death helped him grasp the rage motivating Liongot headhunting; and Michael Moffatt (1989) constructs a narrative about college students with himself as a very present participant/observer (whatever one thinks of his initial ethical lapse in fooling the students about his identity). All three of the men's texts do begin to construct the sexuality of the author as a subject, especially Moffatt's, perhaps because he writes extensively about the students' sexuality.

[7]Quoted in Geertz (1988:98).

[8]This useful term is Rosaldo's (1989:19), and I think he wouldn't mind my adding "sexual," since he alone, of the new ethnographers, includes sexual orientation as a meaningful axis of difference that can help dismantle "objectivism" and add richness to ethnographic accounts (see, especially, 1989:190–193).

[9]Geertz (1988:90) actually observes that in this genre the authorial voice is somehow configured as "an object of desire" but apparently only by readers and from afar.

[10]See also Harris (1967), Hogbin (1968), Greenway (1967), and Geertz (1967).

[11]Just the other day I was discussing the *Diary* in a class of undergraduates. One woman student said, indignantly, "Knowing about the *Diary,* why should I read Malinowski's ethnographies?" And another added, after thinking about it, "Maybe if you could put the *Diary* together with *Sex and Repression,* you'd have good ethnography."

[12]This fact never captures Geertz's awareness. Of those who could be considered in the "I-Witnessing" school of ethnography, the only woman to rate a mention is Barbara Myerhoff, in a footnote (Geertz 1988:101, n. 15). Not even mentioning "Manda Cesara's" *Reflections of a Woman Anthropologist* (1982) in comparison to Rabinow's *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco* (1977) is disappointing, to say the least. Note that Rabinow can just *be* in the field, but "Cesara" has chosen to accept and acknowledge being in the marked category.

[13]For the perspective of an African-American man working in the Caribbean, see T. Whitehead (1986). For a Black lesbian anthropologist working in Yemen, see Walters (1991).

[14]Of course, the majority of gay and lesbian anthropologists are in the closet, which by definition keeps them from publicly acknowledging their orientation and generally from even writing about sexuality. And is it necessary to add that in the review of the literature that follows, the work done on gay *culture* is not mentioned unless it deals specifically with erotic issues and systems? An article about a gay community center, for instance, is not necessarily any more (or less) about sexuality than one on a small-town Elks Club.

[15]Enough to write her an open letter (Newton 1984).

[16]Formerly the *ARGOH Newsletter.*

[17]For an interesting and odd account that actually centers on the homoerotic relations between Amazonian Indians and a Western observer/adventurer, see Schneebaum (1969).

[18]In a conversation at the 1990 AAA Annual Meeting in New Orleans, Walter Williams confirmed that this was the case and that, although he had written more explicitly about it in his manuscript, friends had advised him to "tone it down" before publication, lest too much frankness jeopardize his tenure, which he has since gotten, although only after a struggle.

[19]Perhaps emboldened by Read, other anthropologists have followed in his New Guinea trail with important (though less evocative) work on (homo)sexuality (Herdt 1981, 1984).

[20]The authorial presence in Read's ethnography of a gay bar (1980) is far more tortured and dissembling than in the New Guinea work.

[21]The diffuse homoeroticism, even in Read's first ethnography on the Gahuku-Gama (1965), *did* disturb at least one "sensitive" anthropologist—Clifford Geertz (1988:86)—who, in an appreciation of Read's "brilliantly realized" "I-Witnessing" style, can neither give his discomfort plain speech, nor yet restrain a snide remark about Read's description of the farewell hug he had shared with Makis.

[22]After I began this article, Kath Weston (in press) sent me her piece, "Requiem for a Street Fighter," about her relationship with a young woman who would have been an informant had she not committed suicide, which is to be published in Goodman et al. (in press). See note 26.

[23]In Cherry Grove, Long Island, New York, from the summer of 1985 to the summer of 1989. The book based on this fieldwork, *Cherry Grove, Fire Island: Sixty Years in America's First Gay and Lesbian Town,* is to be published by Beacon Press in 1993 (Newton in press).

[24]A welcome exception here is Serena Nanda's fascinating (1990) work on the third gender Indian Hijras, which received SOLGA's 1990 Ruth Benedict Prize.

[25]Gay and lesbian anthropologists have discussed these problems in a series of recent panels at the annual meetings of the American Anthropological Association, and many of these ground-breaking and silence-breaking papers are forthcoming in Goodman et al. (in press).

[26]I agree with Mascia-Lees et al. (1989:33) that the way to work against the power imbalance between ourselves and our subjects is to make conscious choices to write for them too and to be attentive to research questions that they want answered.

[27]Kay asked me not to publish her last name.

[28]This and all subsequent excerpts in this section are from my unpublished fieldnotes, except for the letter to Schneider.

[29]The categories "gay" and "straight," no matter how fateful and socially real, cannot be taken literally to mean that people so identified are *never,* as individuals, sexually interested in whichever gender is supposed to be erotically null. Even at the time of my dissertation fieldwork with female impersonators in the mid-1960s, I recognized that, improbable as it seemed, my then "best informant's" considerable charms, which included his dresses, or rather his persona in dresses, had a certain erotic component for me. But here I allude to a complex subject far beyond the scope of this article.

[30]Even when we gays are teachers, as many of us are, our identity is the one thing about which most of us can *never* teach the young. Many gay people do not have children who could give them personal and intimate access to succeeding generations, and many cannot share their lives even with nieces and nephews. Kay, for instance, was childless, and never discussed her homosexuality—all of her living, that is, that formed the substance and subject matter of our friendship and was the reason why she had lived in Cherry Grove for 50 summers—with any of her family. Because of the enforced secrecy in which we live, older gays have trouble transmitting our culture to younger ones.

[31]Although our cupboard is bare, it isn't empty. In addition to the articles and books previously referred to, Gregersen (1983) has done a quirky follow-up to Ford and Beach's (1951) early cross-cultural work. For American culture there is Rubin's (1984) article on the hierarchical stratification of sexual practices, Vance's (1983) witty essay on the Kinsey Institute, my own effort to develop a more precise sexual vocabulary (Newton and Walton 1984), Thompson on teen girls (1984, 1990), and Davis and Kennedy's pioneering work on the sexuality of lesbians in Buffalo (1989). For non-Western cultures there is the *berdache* controversy (Callendar and Kochems 1983; Roscoe 1991; H. Whitehead 1981; Williams 1986), the essays in Blackwood (1985), and three monographs: Thomas Gregor's account of the heterosexual Mehinaku (1985), Gilbert Herdt and Robert Stoller's collaboration on the Sambia (1990), and Richard Parker's (1991) Brazilian work, the winner of SOLGA's 1991 Benedict Prize.

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