

AFTER WRITING CULTURE

After writing culture: epistemology and praxis in contemporary anthropology, Edited by Allison James, Jenny Hockey, Andrew Dawson.
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To comment on the recent publication by Routledge *After Writing Culture: Epistemology and Praxis in Contemporary Anthropology*, one has to step back to the middle of the previous decade when the epistemological crisis in anthropology was at its peak. It was characterised by the anthropologists' growing awareness of their role, their subject and the essence of their discipline – *writing*. Practising “anthropology of anthropology” was not much of an issue before that, and the appearance of anthropology's self-critical attitude at that time could in my mind be seen as a positive outcome of the then *en vogue* postmodern scepticism towards everything.

Writing

In April 1984, the School of American Research held an extensive seminar in Santa Fe in New Mexico, the focus of which was to be “the making of ethnographic texts”. Papers by anthropologists like Talal Asad, Paul Rabinow, Renato Rosaldo and many others were later collected into a volume edited by James Clifford and George Marcus and published in 1986 under the title *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. The publishing of *Writing Culture* led to a major paradigm shift first in American and later in European sociocultural anthropology. Although the Third World and feminist authors had been “reinventing” anthropology which they criticised for its Western and male centrality for a decade already, *Writing Culture* contested an anthropologist's authority on a much broader scale. The debate that it raised, centred around the crucial aspect of anthropology which had been taken for granted up to then – the

process of writing. As one of the editors, James Clifford (1986:2) says in the introduction to the volume:

No longer a marginal, or occulted, dimension, writing has emerged as central to what anthropologists do both in the field and thereafter. The fact that it has not until recently been portrayed or seriously discussed reflects the persistence of an ideology claiming transparency of representation and immediacy of experience.

Neglecting to focus on the process of writing is in Clifford's opinion even more astonishing if we take into account that anthropologists have actually always exploited literary approaches. Clifford (1986:3) mentions, for instance, anthropologists like Victor Turner, Clifford Geertz, Mary Douglas, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jean Duvignaud and Edmund Leach, who all have shown an interest in literary theory and practice. But this is not the case only with contemporary or anthropologists of recent past. It is well known that already Bronislaw Malinowski was influenced not only by James Frazer but also very much by Joseph Conrad. The outstanding students of Franz Boas – Margaret Mead, Edward Sapir and Ruth Benedict – saw themselves as both anthropologists and literary artists (*ibid.*).

Why is it then that although anthropologists have from the very outset of their discipline been involved in writing, the method that is common to both art and science (if one wants to maintain this to my mind simplistic distinction) and which blurs the boundary between the two, so little attention has been paid to it? The answer is included already in the wording of the question itself. If the boundary between art and science is blurred, a scientist might lose his or her authority. If anthropologists would have acknowledged their use of literary elements – metaphor, figuration, narrative – which definitely affect the ways cultural phenomena are registered and represented, and, moreover, the fact that writing is always historically, politically and institutionally situated, their writings would have lost the objectivity that science was supposed to have and with that objectivity, their authority. They would not be scientists, neither real novelists but rather *novelists manqué*, as Clifford (1986:4) suggests.

Writing Culture brought the previously almost faceless ethnographer to the centre of the stage. (S)he was no more a neutral and cool perceiver and recorder but an agent with history and personality with particular epistemological constraints. Postmodern ethnographies, self-conscious of the epistemological constraints that an anthropologist studying another culture has to face, turned to experimentation with new forms of writing that would diminish the voice or at least the monovocality of the anthropologist. These new forms, present in postmodern ethnography, were, for instance, dialogism, polyvocality, and co-authorship with the informants. Characteristic of postmodern anthropology was also practising meta-ethnography, *i.e.* “anthropology of anthropology”. Such are, for instance, the texts by James Clifford, whose “informants” are the texts of other anthropologists, and his writings are entirely about the texts by other anthropologists.

One might thus conclude that *Writing Culture* revealed the poetics of anthropology. It showed that anthropological writing is always rhetorical. But so is all science, including physics, mathematics and economics.¹ The distinction between hard and soft sciences is political rather than real. But poetry should not be considered as a degrading factor and the meaning of the term “poetry” should also be negotiated. As Clifford (1986:26) says, all writing should be seen as both poetry and prose:

...to recognise the poetic dimensions of ethnography does not require that one gives up facts and accurate accounting for the supposed free play of poetry. “Poetry” is not limited to romantic or modernist subjectivism: it can be historical, precise, objective. And of course it is just as conventional and institutionally determined as “prose”. Ethnography is hybrid textual activity: it traverses genres and disciplines.

Writing Culture was followed by several publications in the same vein. Another influential book, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*, co-authored by Marcus and Fischer and published also in 1986, claimed that representation in anthropology was in crisis. Paradigmatic concepts once handled as pure and of good perception, were not suitable anymore. The reason for the crisis of representation was also the multiplicity of translatory processes in anthropology. Anthropology is the translation of another culture into the personal experience of an anthropologist, and translating (not transferring) this experience into a literary form to be in turn interpreted by the readers. The problem, however, lies in the fact that experience is usually more complex than the representation of it (Marcus and Fischer 1986:43).

After writing

While the contributors to *Writing Culture* were predominantly Americans, the majority of the contributors to *After Writing Culture* are British or affiliated to British universities. May-be this difference is characteristic of the situation in contemporary anthropology in general – innovative trends and critical approaches are born in American anthropology and reach, if ever, the British one that still seems to be sticking to its colonial roots, with a certain time lag. Similarly to *Writing Culture*, *After Writing Culture* is a collection of papers, presented at the Association of Social Anthropologists Annual Conference in 1995 at Hull University.

After Writing Culture starts where *Writing Culture* stopped. The editors (1997:2) of the volume claim that a decade later the ‘Writing Culture’ debate that was raised by the Santa Fe seminar can be seen as a crystallisation of the uncertainties about anthropology’s subject matter (the “other”), its method (participant observation), its medium (the monograph) and its intention (informing

¹ For the rhetorical aspects of writing in the discipline of economics, see for instance McCloskey (1985).

rather than practice). *After Writing Culture*, as the editors of the volume claim, tries to eschew the antagonisms and pessimisms that the debate aroused and seeks to respond to the challenge for ethnography. Anthropology, as the contributors seem to hint, has a way out of the crisis. It somehow creates the feeling that the postmodern game is over, the uproar of pessimists and nihilists has been suffocated and the power relationships within the discipline have been re-established. It is quite understandable that it is done by the British as anthropology is historically almost “their” discipline. But, of course, this re-establishment cannot go back to the old traditional anthropology. Rather, in a sort of quasi-hegelian way, the re-established anthropology is to synthesise its traditional ethnography-based method with the critical awareness of its epistemological limits that the “writing culture” debate aroused. And thus *After Writing Culture*, though not as radically as *Writing Culture*, also focuses on the interrelationship between epistemology, politics and practice, setting as its main target *representation*. Contributors set themselves a task to answer the questions *who, what, how and why* might we represent. As the editors (3) of the volume acknowledge,

the ‘Writing Culture’ debate has alerted anthropologists to the need to pay closer attention to the epistemological grounds of their representations and, furthermore, has made them consider the practical import of that process of reflection, both for the anthropological endeavour and for those who are subjects of any anthropological enquiry.

The editors distinguish between four discrete epistemological and practical challenges and dilemmas – the humanism of representational practices, the difficulty of uncovering whose representations are being represented and by whom, the problem of the form that different representational practices can take, and the politics and ethics of making representations (3–4).

Anthropology is a modernist project that was challenged on the wave of postmodernism like all other modernist projects. *After Writing Culture* attempts to make an anthropological shift from postmodernism to what Drechsler (1996:293) has called neo-modernism², by trying to reconstruct the project of anthropology. The crucial problem that anthropologists are facing is the essence of all representational processes. It is finally acknowledged that there is no meaning devoid of context, moreover, that the anthropologist himself or herself has turned out to be a meaning-maker. The editors to the volume ask themselves (5), as all anthropologists now have to:

Can anthropologists argue persuasively for their accounts to be accepted if what they offer has to be acknowledged as the provisional product of their interaction, as individual anthropologists, with individual informants who are themselves interacting with and representing one another? Can one live with and within a discipline that sees each account as situated within the contexts of both the field encounter and the anthropologist’s intellectual milieu?

² Drechsler actually uses the term “neo-modern paradigm”.

These are crucial questions as both extremes lead to the death of anthropology. We can no more avoid to take into account the situation of representation, but extreme relativisation and individualisation of the anthropological accounts would mean that the anthropologists' any professional claims to being the purveyors of unmediated accounts or objective 'truths' have to be rejected, as Tyler (1986:5) warned already in *Writing Culture*.

Although the significance of the 'Writing Culture' debate for anthropology has been seen primarily in terms of its impact for the anthropologist's craft as writer, this volume considers that representation involves more than inscription. What *After Writing Culture* directs us towards is a consideration of the wider spheres within which texts come to be debated, criticised and used and their practical authority gains credence. In this sense the book not only calls for a re-examination, following Rabinow and Clifford, of the practice of ethnography but bids us also to direct our gaze towards the social processes by which ethnography gains authority, i.e. what happens *after* writing. Faced with subjectivity and a new recognition and acceptance of the partiality of their accounts, anthropologists can no longer distance themselves from the responsibility for their texts. Moreover, representation often turns out to be *the* thing. As the editors (13) of the volume claim

...an interest in form and style, which might appear narrow, often takes on a political importance when research finds its way outside academy; the complexities of a text are to become condensed into a media soundbite with all subtlety lost, all complexity reduced and all contradiction dulled. It is clear, therefore, that the styling of representations is central to the ways in which our research can be used and be made useful.

Contributors to the volume take different view-points and examine different aspects of anthropology but all the texts centre around the issues of an anthropologist and representation. Lisette Josephides starts out with the premise that anthropological knowledge originates in the field encounter, where one's partial connections are extended to the world, and asks what is the relationship between the field encounter and the epistemological commitments of an anthropologist (16). She compares three styles of ethnographic writing (inspired interpretation, reflexive-authorial attitude, and 'culture in action' approach) and two strategies of ethnographic writing (self-reflexive and deconstructive). An anthropologist has to fight against the idea that if communication across cultures is utopian, then we are living in a utopia, as Josephides (29) claims. Letting people speak for themselves or allowing them agency as actors with their own theoretical perspectives still may not avoid the suspicion that the ethnographer is using them for his own ends.

Glenn Bowman starts from the idea that an anthropological subject is a particular cultural construction of 'Western' thought which has been rendered untenable by development that is sloppily characterised in contemporary academic and popular discourse as 'postmodernist' (34). If anthropology does not work,

Bowman (35) claims, it is not because the world has changed but because anthropology, as a particular expression of an in-large-part European hegemonic project, has never functioned as a means of understanding other cultures. The place of an intellectual has been in the 'ivory tower' of academia – institutionalised by the modernist professionalisation of intellectual cogitation – and thus (s)he has (mostly) been located 'outside' of the world. From this vantage point the intellectual could gaze upon and legislate for the world without the danger of being implicated in its confusion. (39–40). Anthropology, despite the attempts to 'reinvent' the discipline, as Bowman (41) concludes, remains ensnared in a conceptual trap which was constructed in the period of modernist hegemony. If the crisis of modernism has forced us to recognise that the modernist constructions of knowledge and practice accord with the specific cultural codes of an historically specific society, we are nonetheless unwilling to rethink our self-defined distinction from persons of other cultures, Bowman suggests. But, as Bowman (42) warns us, the contemporary anthropological aversion to the hubris of Enlightenment modernism, which is evident in the celebration of radical alterity and cultural relativism, threatens to throw the idea of a common humanism out with the bathwater of modernism.

Declan Quigley, studying the inadequacy of the European representation of Indian caste system, reintroduces the ideas of the major critic of representational capacities of European anthropology – Edward Said. By commenting on Said's *Orientalism*, Quigley (105) poses again the same question – can there be a true representation of anything or are all representations caught up in the linguistic, cultural and political constraints of the observer, always necessarily distorted? His quotation from Dirks (1989:43-4; cf. 112) has an effect of almost a *heureka* experience: the regnant importance of the scholars such as Dumont and Heesterman in the study of India suggests that the ghost of colonial sociology still haunts us – anthropologists still write about the need for a sociology of India and historians still borrow what they need to know about Indian society from Weber and Dumont before proceeding to do social history!

John Knight calls for the need to bring the anthropologist's 'I' more into the text by practising anthropology through personal experience. This he does by describing his personal contribution and experience during the echo festival in Japan. Sharon Macdonald speaks for practising anthropology of anthropology. Although the anthropologists have started to talk about the epistemological aspects of the discipline and the process of writing, their debates have been reticent about the political contests over the writing in the arena of academy and policy, Macdonald (173) claims. Sandra Wallman's article echoes the change in anthropology as a whole. She talks about "appropriate" anthropology by which she (244) means a new gloss on application.

All these and various other essays (Jane Nadel-Klein on Scotland, Joy Hendry on gardens and theme parks in Japan, Robert Layton on landscape in northern Australia, Judith Okely on Gypsy ethnicity, Sandra Wallman on AIDS, etc.),

² Dreyfus usually uses the term "neo-modern paradigm".

although critically aware of the problem of representation in anthropology, echo the faith in post-postmodern anthropology.

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