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ABSTRACT

In "The Uses of Diversity," the interpretive anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, says that it is impossible to completely get inside the point of view of another culture. Geertz contends, however, that despite multiple voices in the growing body of reflexive ethnographies there is still an author composing the work. Besides Geertz, reflexive ethnographies have been elaborated by Paul Rabinow, Marjorie Shostak, Kirin Narayan, and others. In another from of reflexive ethnography, the interpretive interview/essay, the culture is learned about through stories, autobiographies, and personal narratives--the author visibly interacts with the "storyteller." The interview can lean toward the formal or be conversational; it can be a dialogue between two people or among a network of people, but the author/interviewer is still the initiator and still has the last word. The interpretive interview/essays that students at the University of Puerto Rico at Mayaguez write are similar to reflexive autobiographies, but with some differences: the subject or subjects being interviewed can be alive or dead, literal or fictional. Students are not given topics, only rhetorical stimulus, so they may be creative with the concept and the interaction within the form. What has happened as reflexive ethnography has become a respected body of anthropological literature is a change in what constitutes valid science. The interpretive interview/essay is an attempt by reflexive ethnographers and others to invite through form and language better understanding of what it means to be human. (Contains 12 references.) (NKA)

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Clifford Geertz and Beyond: The Interpretive Interview/Essay and Reflexive Ethnography

The interpretive anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, says in his essay, "The Uses of Diversity," that it is impossible to completely get inside the point of view of another culture. Rather, the most we can hope for is to be in their midst through meaningful exchange, dialogue, and dialectic. In this essay Geertz reflects and foreshadows increasingly reflexive ethnography. Geertz does not describe himself as a post-modern, reflexive ethnographer. In WORKS AND LIVES (1988) he acknowledges the value of such an approach in understanding and writing culture. But he contends that despite multiple voices in the growing body of reflexive ethnographies there is still an author composing the work (in some cases, multiple authors). Few would question the tremendous contribution of Clifford Geertz, for he has been a pioneer leading the way to the recent, more reflexive work in anthropology, which invites more openly the voices and stories of the people. They are talking in the texts now--and they are "talking back." They are not just now the "subject" to be studied, or even "interpreted." They collaborate (or appear to be collaborating in some cases) in creating the text, although with Geertz, the anthropologist as essayist is still the one who puts it all together, the one whose insights draw them out, but also the one with whom they interact now to tell their stories.

A first major reflexive ethnography to appear on the scene was Paul Rabinow's REFLECTIONS ON FIELDWORK IN MOROCCO (1977). The book is a personal narrative essay on his fieldwork in Morocco, including his insights on ethnography as a reflexive process. He writes: "Fieldwork is a dialectic between reflection and immediacy. Both are cultural constructs. ...the first time I witnessed activities like this one they required greatly heightened attention on my part; they focussed and dominated my consciousness. But as the fieldwork progressed and I witnessed such performances a number of times, I began to take them largely for granted. They increasingly became part of my stock of knowledge, part of my world. ...This highlighting, identification, and analysis also disturbed Ali's usual patterns of experience. He was constantly being forced to reflect on his own activities and objectify them. Because he was a good informant, he seemed to enjoy this process and soon began to develop an art of presenting his world to me. The better he became at it, the more we shared together. But the more we engaged in such activity, the more he experienced aspects of his own life in new ways" (38-9).

In 1980 another reflexive ethnography on Morocco came out, Vincent Crapanzo's TUHAMI: PORTRAIT OF A MOROCCAN. This ethnography was both the anthropologist's personal narrative of his field experience and the life history of Tuhami, an illiterate Moroccan Arab. Crapanzo says: "As Tuhami's interlocutor, I became an active participant in his life

history, even though I rarely appear directly in his recitations. Not only did my presence, and my questions, prepare him for the text he was to produce, but they produced what I read as a change of consciousness in him. They produced a change of consciousness in me, too" (11). Crapanzo follows with a note: "After finishing TUHAMI, I came across Lawrence Watson's 'Understanding a Life History as a Subjective Document' (1976), in which he takes into account the role of preunderstanding in the dialectical relationship that results in a life history." And he goes on to say that the role of "the interlocutor in the construction of a life history needs elaboration" (11).

In 1981 a different kind of reflexive ethnography appeared--NISA: THE LIFE AND WORDS OF A !KUNG WOMAN, originally published by Harvard University Press. Anthropologist and author, Marjorie Shostak, says that Irven DeVore and Richard Lee, anthropologists from Harvard University, first madecontact with Nisa's people in the Dobe area of northwestern Botswana in 1963. In 1969, Shostak and her husband joined the project and went to live and work with the !Kung. She says: "This story was told to me in the !Kung language by Nisa, an African woman of about fifty years of age, living in a remote corner of Botswana, on the northern fringe of the Kalahari desert. It was March 1971, the last month of my twenty-month field stay among the !Kung San, a people who had recently started to leave their traditional means of subsistence--gathering and hunting. But Nisa, her family, and the people she knew had spent most of their lives" (3-4) as hunters and gatherers.

One from the Caribbean, Richard Price's ethnography, FIRST-TIME (1983), followed NISA's lead. FIRST-TIME is an ethnographic text of the African Diaspora. Price says: "The Saramakas--about 20,000 people--live in the heavily forested interior of the Republic of Suriname in Northeastern South America. Their ancestors were among those Africans who were sold into slavery in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries to work Suriname's sugar, timber, and coffee plantations. They soon escaped into the dense rain forest--individually, in small groups, sometimes in great collective rebellions--where for over one hundred years they fought a war of liberation. In 1762, a full century before the general emancipation of slaves in Suriname, they won their freedom" (1). This ethnography, different in format from NISA, has the legends and stories of origin in the words of the Saramakas at the top of each page and the response and commentary of Richard Price at the bottom. Shostak's and Nisa's stories are from side to side, with Nisa's story in translation.

Robin Ridington's story, TRAIL TO HEAVEN (1988), of his work among the Dunne-Za, or Beaver Indians, in Northeastern British Columbia is yet another important variation in the development of reflexive ethnography. His book is a personal narrative of his field experience that draws in and interacts with the stories of the people. He describes it as 'stories within a story' (xii). He begins: "TRAIL TO HEAVEN describes moments in the life of a northern Indian community. It describes these moments from the point of view of my own involvement

with the community and its people. It begins with the story of my first encounter with 'real live Indians'. It is about the thoughtworld of Beaver Indian people and about the world of ideas and assumptions I brought to my encounters with them. As such, it is also a commentary on the ideas and assumptions of the thoughtworld we call anthropology" (ix).

The last reflexive ethnography I will mention won the American Anthropological Associations' ethnography award in 1990--Kirin Narayan's STORYTELLERS, SAINTS, AND SCOUNDRELS. It is her story of sitting with many others at the feet of an Indian storyteller, named Swamiji, who captivated his daily audiences with his folk narratives in Hindu religious teaching. Here we have an Indian Ph.D. student from the University of Pennsylvania (he was aware of her purpose) losing her self-consciousness about her thesis research, although her tape recorder was running, becoming one with the group of listeners, yet drawing in their individual ways their own spiritual meanings and illuminations from the stories, and interacting with the storyteller to ask questions or to make comments.

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The interpretive interview/essay, as my students and I have named it at the University of Puerto Rico at Mayaguez, is yet another response and variation in reflexive ethnography, and, you might say, also a form of "native ethnography." We do learn about the culture, though most often in individual

and revelatory ways, through stories, autobiographies, and personal narratives. The interpretive interview/essay does not lose sight of the author composing the text, but the author visibly interacts with the "interviewee," "informant," or, as I prefer, the "storyteller." The essay becomes multi-vocal. The writer's own insights are as important and as valid, however, as those he elicits from the person or persons with whom he is talking. He or she is as well a character in the story. Ridington says of his experience with the Dunne-Za: "We can communicate because we listen to one another's stories. We can communicate because we are characters in one another's stories" (x-xi). The interpretive interview/essay can lean more towards the formal interview or can be more conversational. It can be a dialogue between two people or among a network of people (of course, including electronic "talk" on the computer or on the Internet). As TRAIL TO HEAVEN and others, it can be stories within a story. But the author/essayist/ interviewer is still the one who initiates the story and who has the last word. However, as Rabinow and Crapanzo tell in their experience writing REFLECTIONS and TUHAMI, both "interviewer" and "interviewee" may be transformed in the process. Ridington observes on his stay among the Dunne-Za: "My own memories and interpretations are as much a part of the reality of the events I have described as are

those of the other participants" (287).

The interpretive interview/essays that my students write are similar to the reflexive ethnographies I have mentioned, but with some differences: The subject or subjects being interviewed can be alive, or dead; literal or fictional. (I should note here that literary nonfiction, fiction, poetry, and drama have become respected ethnographic forms. The official journal of the Society for Humanistic Anthropology, a subsidiary organization of the American Anthropological Association, is the ANTHROPOLOGY AND HUMANISM QUARTERLY, which makes annual awards now in these genres. Regna Darnell, an anthropologist writing in ANTHROPOLOGICAL POETICS, 1991, ed. Ivan Brady, says in her essay, "Ethnographic Genre and Poetic Voice": "Poetry articulates with anthropology in a variety of ways for different anthropologists and for the same anthropologist in different contexts of observation and subsequent reflection. ...For others however, including myself, that articulation of disciplinary and biographical--Weltanschauung and Lebenswelt--is the crux of the matter, the rationale for turning to poetry as a method of doing anthropology" (267).) The interpretive interview/essay, as my students and I have conceived it, can indeed be also fictional and a valid form of reflexive ethnography. I don't know that any anthropologist has tried the fictional form yet. At any rate, the possibilities of the interpretive interview/ essay in the new world of reflexive ethnography are rich and open a whole new dimension in reflexive ethnography.

I never give my students topics, only the rhetorical stimulus, so the students can be as creative as they wish in coming up with the concept and the creative interaction within the interpretive interview/essay. I think of the Puerto Rican student who came by to see me to talk about the idea for her essay. I told her about an earlier student who said she wanted to interview her great-grandmother to learn about Puerto Rico in the early twentieth century--but there was a problem. A talkative aunt was always in the room. And I said: 'Let her talk, too.' The resulting essay from the later student was a networked interpretive interview/essay. She described a ride she took with her mother and grandmother to San Juan. The title of the essay: "Shut Up and Let Your Grandma Talk." The mother is driving. The grandmother is on the right side in the front. The granddaughter (also the essayist) is in the back. And she begins asking her grandmother about how her grandfather had been murdered, many years before. As the story unfolds, the daughter also enters in to tell and elicit more of the story of how the grandfather had died. The "star" of this interpretive interview/essay is the grandmother, who tells quite a story. I think of the grandson sitting on the bed with his grandfather, asking about Dad. The essayist in this case is not the grandson but an omniscient narrator. As the essayist tells the story, we learn that there were problems between the son and his father. What does not become apparent until the end is that the son is listening unseen behind the door

as his father tells about their troubled relationship and apologizes to his grandson for his mistakes with his son. I think of the student who told me he wanted to interview Jesus. I was a little skeptical, thinking he was trying to be cute, until I learned that the student was a devout Christian and wants to be a missionary. Here is an excerpt from the last two pages:

> Wow! I was speaking to the Father Himself!
> 'Are you the one who gives me internal peace? This is incredible. But, how can you love me the way I am? How can you?'
> 'You're my best creation, my son. I love you.'
> ...
> Tears ran down my cheeks, and I asked once again:
> 'But, what did you see in me?'
> Jesus responded: '<u>myself</u>'...

One of the most creative and well-done examples to come in so far is entitled, "A Man of Peace." This interpretive interview/essay builds on the concept of a dream vision, in which the student writer dreams of going to Washington, D.C. on the year of his birth, 1963, and meeting Martin Luther King, Jr., at the Lincoln Memorial. (I will cite an excerpt from the last two pages of the essay, but what I find also interesting in this essay is the essayist's narrative digression to one of his own experiences with racism, which becomes a

a deeply reflexive and transformative moment in the larger narrative that reflects on the talk with Dr. King.)

And now an excerpt from "A Man of Peace":

> 'But why shouldn't we be willing to fight for our rights, Reverend King?' I asked.
>
> 'Because man's anger does not bring about God's righteousness,' he replied. I do encourage fighting for our rights...as a matter of fact, that's what we're doing. Only that our weapons in this war are a little different.'
>
> 'But if you don't defend yourself, you get killed! It isn't fair at all. You will never see the fruits of your labour...not in this life!'
>
> 'I'll see them in the next.'
>
> (Martin Luther King, Jr. was born in 1929 in Atlanta, Georgia, and was educated at Morehouse College, Crozer Theological Seminary, and Boston University. Ordained a Baptist minister in his father's church in 1947, King soon became involved in civil rights activities in the South. In 1957 he founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and established himself as America's most prominent spokesman for non-violent racial integration. In 1963 he was named TIME magazine's Man of the Year; in 1964 he was given the Nobel Peace Prize. In 1968 he was in Memphis, Tennessee...)*
>
> This time I sneaked right behind him, but I didn't want to catch his attention. He was sitting on a couch in a rented motel room, reading his favorite book. I can still recall the passage he was reading...
>
> 'I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whosoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be.'--John 12:24-26
>
> A bright sun ray leaked through the curtains, inviting the refreshing sight of a beautiful Spring morning. Reverend King put the book aside, stood up, and started walking towards the curtains and through the large crystal door that led to a small balcony. I wanted to warn him. I thought about keeping him from going outside. But as quick as I was about to speak I understood that he was about to take the unavoidable path of the truly great men of this world. Perhaps he felt my presence, as he

*The student writer is paraphrasing an excerpt from a headnote on Martin Luther King, Jr. in The Riverside Reader (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996), p. 455.

> stood for a very short moment to look over his shoulder. But the morning was beautiful, the air was cool; he was only going outside for a little while to catch some fresh air. Which was all that the enemies of peace needed.
>
> There was a sound, and a quick thud as Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. fell on the floor. His aides rushed to the scene...Just another of the world's greatest men had been assassinated. Down on earth, there was the usual turmoil that happens when someone of the stature of this Man of God and Civil Rights Leader is murdered. High above, nearing the heavens, a choir of angels assembled in majestic array to welcome home another one of God's children. High above, where there are no distinctions based on race, or color, or nationality... high above, where all men stand equal before God...high above, where bullets can't reach... I looked, and I could almost hear the voice of Martin Luther King singing amidst the choir of angels, in the words of the old Negro spiritual, 'Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, I'm free at last!'

(The essayist was a Puerto Rican student in my Advanced Composition class last semester, who has since graduated and is now a graduate student at a university in the United States.)

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The question of ethnographic authority is paramount in narrative or reflexive ethnography because subjective or interpretive response becomes part of the story. What has happened as reflexive ethnography has become a respected body of anthropological literature (though not without its detractors) has been a change in what constitutes valid science. Regna Darnell and other anthropologists in ANTHROPOLOGICAL POETICS do say that there is still a need for more "traditional ethnography." But there now is a place for mythopoetics, "artful science," as Ivan Brady describes it in his introduction (3). The old questions of the relation between subject and object no longer work, not

if one is to be serious about getting inside "lived experience." Brady says: "Changing ideas about what can be studied and how it can be said in anthropology to something more directly rooted in a poetics of the immediate, the concrete, intersubjective communication, and cross-cultural intertextualities can reform the telling of anthropology's 'stories'--its poetic and scientific 'tales of the field'" (14). The anthropologist Dan Rose in his essay, "In Search of Experience" in ANTHROPOLOGICAL POETICS describes this intersubjective, intertextual "zone" as "mutual engagement" (233).

Clifford Geertz set the stage with his seminal ideas of "thick description," interpretation, and local knowledge. (In fact, "thick description" with its layers of interpretation and meaning informs the interpretive interview/essay, especially the networked ones.) But it's beyond just interpretation now to "exchange," an area, you might say, of "gift-giving," where the greatest gift is to share with another something of yourself. To do this we cannot write outside the subject. We have to engage the subject in whatever literary form or voice--or voices--the writing and the situation call for--and in turn the subject will engage us--the first step toward mutual understanding (as far as it is possible to really know and understand someone else or another culture. There are those incommensurabilities that resist translation--and they should).

A gifted black student from Antigua, who recently wrote a short story/essay, entitled "Obeah Night," on

a voo-doo ceremony set in Africa, said to me recently: "I have a real problem with racism." And I responded: "I do, too." The first step is dialogue. What each person brings to this dialogue and takes away from it because of the transformational process of "mutual engagement" is what the interpretive interview/essay is about: an attempt by reflexive ethnographers and others to invite through form and language better understanding of what it means to be human. For story and dialogue to open it up is the oldest, the most natural, the most profound, and the most promising of human responses and initiatives. It has taken more than a century for anthropologists to discover this simple and, at the same time, deeply complex truth.

*The article is based on a paper presentation at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, March 13, 1997, in Phoenix, Arizona.

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