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Turning points and textual strategies in ethnographic writing

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In an essay on infertility and pregnancy, anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod (1995) places her own personal experience of IVF and a resultant pregnancy in the context of her work and life as an ethnographer among Bedouin women. The article is quite ''self-reflexive,'' but the author makes use of her own experiences in order to convey a sense of what it means to be a pregnant or trying-to-get-pregnant woman in another cultural context. This essay gives ethnographic insights about Bedouin cultural practices and belief about pregnancy, while at the same time tells us about the ways in which an ethnographer both shapes and is shaped by her encounters ''in the field.'' Lila writes: ''In being pregnant, I was finding that the cultural resources I had at my disposal to think about what I was experiencing and to fill in gaps in my knowledge of an uncertain terrain included both those 'from home' and those 'from the field,' often juxtaposed'' (1995, p. 347). This type of writing is considered ''experimental'' in anthropology because it does not use the conventions of what Marcus and Cushman (1982) have identified as the ''realist'' approach to writing, in which an omniscient narrator would detail and analyze Bedouin women's behavior and belief with an aim of ''objective'' description. I take the liberty of assuming that Abu-Lughod's desire is not primarily to be ''scientific'' (if this means objectively categorizing and analyzing ethnographic research), but, rather, to convey to the reader the ''human'' qualities of both the ethnographer and Bedouin women – to ''humanize'' the ethnographic encounter.

So-called ''experimental'' ethnographic writing has become increasingly prominent in recent years, as ''new'' ways of representing ethnographic encounters have emerged. It can be seen as a mode of writing against realist conventions of ethnographic description, in which the self of the ethnographer is de-emphasized or hidden altogether. Here, as in Abu-Lughod's essay, the ethnographer is revealed to be vulnerable, to shift ethnographic perspectives according to her own life experiences. While the ways of establishing the authority of the author associated with realist ethnography have been questioned, new forms of credibility are emerging. ''Authority'' of the author may not be the most accurate term to apply to the newer forms of writing, in which the voices of ''native'' informants are not always overshadowed by that of the anthropologist. In newer representations of ethnography, authors seek to be persuasive and credible, rather than to position themselves in some type of conclusive ''authority.'' In self-reflexive ethnographic writing, this is established through the ethnographer's ability to write sensitively and engagingly about (and, above all, to problematize) the border zones and sites of encounter between his or her life story and that of ''the natives.''

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William Tierney makes three key points in his essay ''Get real: representing reality'' about representation in qualitative social science writing. First, he identifies a widespread rhetoric of a ''crisis of representation'' about qualitative social science writing. He urges colleagues to move beyond this language of crisis in order to better see the choices available to them. Second, he seeks to broaden acceptable choices in writing strategy, rather than simply replace hegemonic positivist-inspired forms of writing with hegemonic postmodernist-inspired forms. He challenges what he feels is a new orthodoxy in qualitative writing that is self-reflexive and experimental at the expense of other forms of representation and writing that can be equally compelling. A prominent figure in his discussion is sociologist Laurel Richardson, who, he argues, would replace expository forms of writing with fiction, poetry, and memoir. Third, he proposes an emphasis on pedagogy, in which students in our classes would be encouraged to experiment with voice in writing and to learn to be better writers. I am sympathetic with much of what Tierney writes, and particularly with his point that praxis should be part of what we do. I agree with Marcus and Fischer (1986) that anthropology should properly be shaped as ''cultural critique.''

I read Tierney's essay as an American anthropologist, for whom qualitative research means in-depth and long-term ethnographic research, most often conducted either abroad or among a marginal social group within the U.S. Most of my own ethnographic research has been conducted in France, mostly in a rural dairy farming community. I realize that there are other forms and understandings of qualitative research, but will address issues of representation and writing in relationship to this type of research here, primarily because this is what I do and struggle with myself. Given Tierney's urge for us to broaden our narrative strategies, I wonder if a poem or short story submitted as response to his essay would have been acceptable to the editor of this journal, but have decided to write a more standard expository essay with slight insertion of myself and my own experiences woven into it.

In my response to Tierney, I would like to broaden the terms of this discussion by unpacking what I see as two separate issues: One is the issue of self-reflexivity in ethnographic writing, and the other is the relationship between ethnographic writing and other genres of representation (such as film, fiction, poetry, or autobiography). I was frustrated in reading Tierney's essay by his lack of specificity about the terms of the crisis of representation, about what exactly are the issues at stake that prompted this kind of language of ''crisis.'' I believe that there may be several issues at stake, and that people who use this language may not all be referring to the same thing. This depends quite a bit on how one defines ethnography. One way to interpret this ''crisis of representation'' is to see it in terms of the ethnographer's relationship to his or her informants. Here the questions in writing become those of: How should the ethnographer represent these people and their culture in his or her writing? How should the encounter and relationship between ethnographer and informants be represented in the writing? And, how should the ethnographer represent him- or herself in the writing? Important in these questions is also the role of the informant in representing him- or herself in the equation. Since so many anthropological encounters are between subordinate or relatively powerless people and ethnographers who hold positions of greater wealth and power, the issues of voice and representation in their relationships have become contested.

The ''crisis'' is akin to an ''identity crisis'' in which one is no longer sure of oneself and questions one's motives, desires, goals, etc. The anthropologist no longer can assume a voice of objective authority, or a self-righteous certainty that his/her inter-

pretation is "true." We know that the "natives" have their own interpretations, and that our colleagues may also see things differently. Lila Abu-Lughod addresses these points in her writing, trying to solve the dilemma of how to not position oneself as "superior" to one's informants and to place oneself on the same footing (here, the "leveling" occurs through the common female experience of pregnancy as well as feelings of vulnerability associated with it). She also shows that she is not someone who remains "outside" of the fieldwork encounter, untouched through scientific objectivity. Rather, her encounters in the field intimately affect her most basic life experiences, even when she is "at home."

The issue of representation and self-reflexivity is quite complex, and depends upon our understandings that being autobiographical is not necessarily being more "authentic" or "real." There are conventions of autobiographical writing as much as there are conventions of ethnographic writing. The concept of autoethnography captures tension between "postmodern ethnography, in which the realist conventions and objective observer position of standard ethnography have been called into question, and a postmodern autobiography, in which the notion of the coherent, individual self has been similarly called into question" (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 2). I suggest that autoethnography is a useful concept for thinking about representation and ethnography, but that it has multiple histories and uses. It can refer both to the autobiographical or self-reflexive voice of the ethnographer who inserts him- or herself into the text, and to ethnography produced by an "insider" or "native" observer of his or her own cultural milieu. The idea is to transcend and move forward from the dichotomies of objective vs. subjective and self vs. society. Autoethnography, while a term that seems to date in its earliest uses to the 1970s, is an approach to ethnographic representation that is not "new." We can find evidence of it in much earlier textual strategies.

The example of Gladys Reichard illustrates the type of plurality of narrative construction advocated by Tierney, and also suggests that we don't need to necessarily "reinvent the wheel" in order to achieve this. Reichard represents an earlier generation of anthropologists who experimented with genres of writing, long before the current influences of postcolonialism, postmodernism, and feminism. As Lessie Jo Frazier writes, Reichard and her contemporaries "explored a wide spectrum of modes of representation, including encyclopedic studies, dry field reports, poetry, film, photography, novels, plays, collections of texts, popular magazine articles and ethnographies" (Frazier, 1993, p. 364). Reichard, a student of Elsie Clews Parson and Franz Boas, studied among the Navajo. Her autoethnography *Spider woman* is based on her ethnographic experiences as an apprentice weaver among Navajo women. *Spider woman* was first published in 1934, before "experimental ethnography" and autoethnography became fashionable. The representation of the ethnographer as apprentice (as learner) contrasts quite dramatically with that of the ethnographer as objective outsider observer and expert. The apprenticeship genre of ethnographic writing enables a narrative of culture "from the inside," and of an evocation of the emotional life of both "natives" and ethnographer. Reichard describes an awkward moment when a husband of one of her weaving teachers complains that she does not pay his wife enough money. Reichard writes:

> I point out that, while she is teaching me, she is getting more than any of the educated girls who are working, and at the same time she can be working for herself. I try to be patient as I explain these things. These people live near the

> railroad. They have been exploited for years by white people. They are on the defensive against exploitation but they really have no defense. "You will learn to weave, and you will teach the white women to weave so that the Navajo women won't be able to earn money any more."
>
> I should not be able to suppress a smile if another white person or even Marie were with me, but alone as I am, it seems too pathetic to be funny. I tell him how my family would starve if they depended on my weaving for a living. I tell him how bad and how slow I am at spinning. After a time he is silenced but not convinced. (1998, p. 216)

Reichard is a relevant figure to discuss in the context of Tierney's concerns because she herself experimented with several genres. Her experience among the Navajo weavers resulted not only in the autoethnographic *Spider woman*, but in a novel about a Navajo weaver, and a more technical manual on the techniques of weaving. She also wrote several other books on subjects such as Navajo religion and language. The glaring point about Reichard is, however, that her writing remained quite marginal in anthropology until recently, and her work on the Navajo was always overshadowed by that of her more famous male colleague, Clyde Kluckholn. Nevertheless, her experimentations with different forms of representation can stand today as evidence that diverse models for ethnographic writing are out there for us to discover.

I applaud Tierney for questioning those who would narrowly hold up "texts that use the active voice, utilize the first person, and aim for a more dramatic retelling of events" as a new orthodoxy in narrative strategies for ethnographers. It is an overstatement, however, to lump all reflexive writing as a form of narcissism. The line between narcissism and effective ethnographic writing lies often, however, in the writing abilities of the author and in his/her ability to make use of his/her own experiences as a way to teach us about our craft itself and/or the social worlds of those "others" who are the participants in our research. Several books written over the past decade (Atkinson, 1992; Coffey, 1999; Davies, 1999; Rapport, 1997) critically examine self-reflexive modes of writing and point toward ways of writing that can reconcile concerns with social critique and social change on the one hand, and concerns with adequately representing ourselves and those who participate in our research. Teaching our students to experiment with different forms of writing, as Tierney does, can help them question their assumptions about narrative voice, and is useful. Most good writers, however, also point to their experiences of reading as an influence on their writing. We should also expose our students to reading various texts and critiquing their construction, voice, etc.

Overall, Tierney seems to be pleading for us to become better writers, but socially engaged writers. He holds up realist novels of social criticism, such as *Germinal* or *Elmer Gantry*, as effective strategies. There are, of course, postmodern as well as realist forms of fiction – as there are the two forms of ethnography. Each of us must decide what we hope to accomplish in our writing in order to choose a mode of writing, and I think the key here is that we should have a choice. Are we in a "crisis"? I looked up the word "crisis" in a thesaurus in order to see if there might be a better word, and found "turning point." We are at a turning point in ethnographic writing, and there are several roads ahead that we can choose. I agree with Tierney, however, that we should have a choice in narrative strategy. We should remember that choices were always there, however, as evidenced by Reichard and some of her colleagues earlier in this

century. There is a shifting terrain, in which forms of writing and representation move from margin to center and back again.

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