ETHNOGRAPHIC WRITING
AS GRASSROOTS DEMOCRATIC ACTION

Theories of writing grounded in cultural studies and ethnographic writing have explicitly taken up questions of writing students' relations to cultures and communities outside the academy. There are close interconnections between these theories; at the forefront is the notion that the work students do inside the academy (as writers, readers, interpreters) is closely related to students' political engagements outside the academy (as consumers, employees, union members, volunteers for nonprofits, grassroots political participants, voters). In other words, these theories emphasize what students do as members of cultures/communities; those activities' connections to classroom practices vary widely, and as a result, they construe writing and its relations to culture in very different ways. Many ethnographic writing assignments, especially those that derive from anthropologists like Clifford Geertz, James Clifford and George Marcus, construe writing as an interpretive act. A different conception of ethnographic writing drawn from radical anthropology, one that emphasizes the material implications of engaging in processes of producing and circulating texts, offers students, teachers, and participants in ethnographic research some powerful options for collaborating in processes of grassroots democratic action.

Let me be clear from the beginning that I don't intend to detail a pedagogy that enacts the theoretical argument this piece makes. There are several reasons for this choice. First, ethnography is quintessentially local; to tell anybody how to do it is contrary to its politics. Second, other writers have provided any number of possible ways of teaching ethnographic writing (or using ethnographic writing to teach certain concepts), many of which are cited (if not described in some detail) in the text. Third, although ethnographic writing offers strong democratizing potential for composition...

Seth Kahn is an Assistant Professor of English at West Chester University of Pennsylvania. His teaching and research focus on relations among writing, research, and activism. He has published in Studies in Popular Culture, College Composition and Communication, and NCTE's Strategies for Teaching First-Year Composition.
students and teachers, elaborating its practices may overdetermine the ways that readers might enact this kind of theoretical position on curricular or programmatic levels.

**WHAT'S LEFT OF LEFT PEDAGOGIES**

Although it's not exactly right to say that cultural studies and ethnographic writing pedagogies are oriented identically (even among advocates of any of those pedagogies, the politics aren't identical), it seems fair to say that the common turn away from academic writing for its own sake is no accident of history. The politics of cultural studies pedagogy was developed in some detail in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In early formulations, cultural studies pedagogies emerged from composition studies' urge to reclaim a leftist political trajectory in response to Reagan-Thatcher era conservatism (see Trimbur's "Cultural Studies and Teaching Writing" for details of this account). Two strong critics of this turn, Maxine Hairston and Gary Tate, pushed advocates of cultural studies to articulate the political project of cultural studies with the educational project of composition studies. James Berlin, John Trimbur, John Schilb, and Bruce McComiskey have invoked theoretical constructs emerging from and/or popularized by the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Culture Studies (BCCCS) to describe and teach the situated nature of writing: Williams' theories of culture; Louis Althusser's, Smith's and Goren Therborn's notions of ideology, interpellation and agency; Roland Barthes', Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress' and Stuart Hall's notions of semiotic codes; and the theories of textuality and discourse that circulate through these theorists and their cadre.

Attempts to theorize writing through these lenses have taken two different, although not entirely distinct, approaches. First, Berlin (see "Rhetoric and Ideology," "Composition and Cultural Studies," and "Composition Studies and Cultural Studies") and Trimbur ("Cultural Studies," "Literacy") relate the projects of composition studies and cultural studies under the rubric of rhetoric; this relation allows them to reclaim the tradition of political participation that stretches back to classical rhetorical training. Second, Berlin ("Rhetorics, Poetics"), Schilb and McComiskey argue that cultural studies theory describes relations between writers, readers, texts and cultures that position students as writer-subjects with agency to resist oppressive ideological formations. Connecting these two approaches, both Berlin and McComiskey turn to the work of Karen Burke LeFevre, whose *Invention as a Social Act* argues that rhetorical invention happens in the context of socially and historically determined commonplaces; as such, the making of text and the sharing of textual meanings are socially and historically determined to a large degree.

Although the notions of writing both as politically/culturally situated and as politically/culturally constitutive that circulate through these texts are appealing, the ways that students are positioned as writers while they're actually in writing classes are not. Berlin, Schilb, Trimbur, and McComiskey (along with Henry Giroux and other critical pedagogists) construct the classroom as a place where students don't necessarily do political/cultural work, but instead learn to do it. The classroom is a place to practice the practices of political participation rather than to engage in such practices. Berlin and Schilb offer particularly stark examples of this point.

Berlin details the theoretical process by which students discover, negotiate, and resist subject-positions in *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures*. Drawing primarily on two prominent cultural studies theorists, Paul Smith and Stuart Hall, Berlin lays out a theory of rhetorical practice that (in his eyes) prepares students to take on the work of democratic citizenship in a post-Fordist society. Specifically, Berlin turns to the work of literary critic Paul Smith, whose *Discerning the Subject* contends that human agency emerges from the sometimes contrary interpellations to which we are subjected; for example, my agency as an academic is the product of contrary pulls between my theoretical/political orientation on the one hand and my institutional responsibilities on the other. Since neither the theoretical nor the institutional apparatuses fully interpellate me, I am in a position from which I have to negotiate their addresses. Whereas Smith turns to feminist theory to explain how subjects negotiate their positions, Berlin turns to Stuart Hall's "Encoding/Decoding" for Hall's elaboration of "accommodating," "negotiating," and "resisting" the messages encoded in texts. Hall argues that the various ways we consume texts are products of the various social formations in which we live and work. In other words, the subject-positions we take up in texts are formed by more than the texts themselves.

The writer in Berlin's formation becomes a subject who negotiates her way through a maze of sometimes-conflicting semiotic codes by interpreting (reading and writing about) them. The subject also, by virtue of her negotiations among these codes, becomes an agent of resistance rather than a conduit for transparent, non-ideological languages. Writing and reading, so the story goes, become democratic actions:

For democracy to function (as we are now reminded in Eastern Europe), citizens must actively engage in public debate, applying reading and writing practices in the service of articulating their positions and their critiques of the positions of others. To have citizens who are unable to read and write for the public forum thus defeats the central purpose of the notion of democracy we have just examined: to ensure that all interests are heard before a communal decision is made. (*Rhetoric* 101)
Writing and reading are no longer school-subjects to be consumed; rather, they are by nature political acts at the heart of democratic life. The ultimate goal is to “enable students to become active, critical agents of their experience rather than passive victims of cultural codes” (104).

However much Berlin uses the terms writing and reading together (or under the rubric of interpretation), his reliance on Smith and Hall to develop a theory of political action reinforces the very politics of consumption he means to critique. In other words, neither Smith nor Hall offers any notion that writing (that is, production of text) leads to social change—instead, both Smith and Hall describe resistant reading practices and positions. Berlin’s theoretical position suggests that our post-Fordist economic structure demands this kind of attention to consumption, but I would argue that he’s lost the battle as soon as he makes consumption the centerpiece of his theoretical framework. I would also argue that his emphasis on consumption is a product of his own institutional agenda; for years, Berlin’s work focused on ways to rethink relations between composition and literature, between rhetoric and poetic (see “Composition Studies and Cultural Studies”), between reading and writing, within English departments. Given the long history of political tensions between composition studies and literary studies, and the privileged position that literary studies enjoys, Berlin’s agenda goes beyond his concern for the well-being of democracy. There appears to be something of a disjuncture between Berlin’s practices and his political goals. Because his is a pedagogy of resistance, students might learn how not to be dominated, but nowhere do they learn to engage actively in changing structures of domination.

John Schilb tries to develop active political roles for himself and his students as “coinquirers” into cultural values and meanings (187). Ideally, students in Schilb’s course learn to engage postmodern and cultural studies theory as a way to understand their lived experiences in the complexities of a postmodern world. However, in practice (at least based on his brief description), his students read Fredric Jameson and consider contemporary cultural texts in light of Jameson’s theoretical apparatus—not much different from learning New Criticism and using it to read Faulkner. At best, his course involves students in analyzing and critiquing languages/power-structures/ideologies rhetorically. Students might learn by writing and sharing their writing, but there’s nothing to indicate that the writing they do is any different from what they might do in a writing-intensive literature or cultural studies course, i.e., nothing to indicate that they learn anything about writing from writing. In other words, Schilb (and Berlin) put student-writing in service of theory and critique, such that the instrumentality of writing that cultural studies and postmodern theory mean to subvert is reproduced.

McComiskey’s Teaching Composition as a Social Process begins to resolve these problems—both the problem of overtly academic inscription and the inattention to distribution of student texts; whereas neither Berlin nor Schilb asks students to advocate any kind of social action beyond critique, McComiskey requires his students to use those critiques to advance solutions. For example, he describes the work of one student who critiques the conditions of the restrooms in his dorm, and follows that up by suggesting to the supervisor of janitorial services that the bathrooms need to be cleaned more often (13-16). Although McComiskey isn’t especially satisfied with the position the student ultimately takes—nor do we ever find out whether the student got a response from his work—what’s important is that the student’s writing has moved beyond the classroom space.

Well, maybe. As much as McComiskey tries to elaborate theoretical grounds from which student writing engages social and political issues, in the end, it’s not clear that he finally repositions the students as clearly as he wants to. The glitch results from his argument that, in the name of radical participatory democracy, he can’t force students to distribute their advocacy texts to the people they write them for. In order to be consistent with his own politics, there’s no legitimate way to require students to participate in democratic processes. I’m sympathetic to this claim. However, his response to it puts him in a difficult position; rather than rethinking what it is he’s asking students to do, he explains that in the case of students who don’t want to present their texts to non-classroom audiences, he tries to emulate the reading he thinks the texts would get. He therefore undercuts whatever value he might have gained by having students extend their texts outside the classroom by reinscribing the classroom boundaries. Of course, those boundaries are never entirely erased—students might well not be writing advocacy papers in the first place if they weren’t registered for a writing course in which they’re assigned. However, in the end, this choice not to require making public what are written as ostensibly public documents positions McComiskey’s work alongside Berlin’s and Schilb’s in its demarcation of classroom cultures as something other than the public spaces they want to prepare students to operate in.

Another way to describe the problem: cultural studies pedagogies, especially those grounded in various (post-)Marxist theories, rely on structures of production, distribution, and consumption for their explanatory value. However, in none of these accounts is the notion of distribution clearly explored. Hall’s “Encoding/Decoding” and Richard Johnson’s “What is Cultural Studies, Anyway?” make strong claims that studying any element of the production-distribution-consumption cycle to the exclusion of the others distorts any understanding we might come to of the cycle as a whole.
But even McComiskey’s attempt to attend to distribution ultimately risks eliding distribution when he offers students the option not to distribute their texts to sites where they might do their cultural work. As a result, students’ roles in both production and distribution are undervalued.

More to the point, while these cultural studies pedagogies may demand a great deal of student writing, there is little attention to the grassroots work that the students’ writing might do. Some versions of service-learning pedagogy address this particular problem by emphasizing the production and distribution of active interventions into the lived experiences of non-academic culture/community members. Thomas Deans has argued that service-learning pedagogy constrains writing in three different relations to the communities in which students do their service: writing about the community (which often resembles ethnographic writing in many ways); writing for the community; and writing in the community. In any of these relations, the writing that students do (and I should say that in any given course, more than one of these might happen) either directly intervenes in the lives of agencies (or their clients) or inscribes a direct intervention into those lives.

The directness of these interventions aligns my own thinking closely with service-learning. Several times, as I’ve described assignments, colleagues have said that they didn’t realize I teach service-learning courses, and I don’t. What distinguishes my vision of an ethnographic writing course from service learning is the distinction between participation (what participant-observers do at their sites) as intervention and service as intervention. Put simply, I’m concerned about pre-structuring students’ experiences in their sites by positioning them as volunteers, or as resources for agencies to use. Rather, based on the assumption that both students and teachers are equal participants in democratic culture, an ethnographic assignment allowing students’ participant roles to be negotiated more fluidly from the beginning of their fieldwork seems to increase the assignment’s grassroots potential. I want to be clear that this issue is a matter of preference. There are certainly interesting problematics for students and teachers to work through when students have to consider the pre-structured positions they enter in service sites.

**Disciplinary Influences in Ethnographic Writing**

Although most cultural studies and ethnographic pedagogy advocates don’t make specific reference to discourse-community models of writing theory that were dominant in the mid- to late 1980s, one impetus for what some disciplinary commentators call the “cultural turn” was resistance to the idea that the mission of composition courses is to “bring students in” to academic languages, i.e., to help them, or to demand that they internalize and naturalize language practices that may have little to do with their previous or future experiences. Other impetuses seem to have been: 1) the influx of postmodern theory into composition, with its emphases on fragmented knowledge, localization, textuality, and resistance; 2) the critique of positivism/scienticism that swept across the humanities and social sciences at large throughout the 1980s; and 3) a growing dissatisfaction with the rendering of composition as a service discipline for the rest of the academy. There are likely others as well. These signs enabled the formation of pedagogies that emphasized local, not traditionally academic, interdisciplinary ways of doing and thinking about writing. Obviously this turn didn’t take over the entire field. For example, at the same time that some compositionists were turning to ethnography, cultural studies, and service-learning, others (in significant numbers, if it seems) were turning to professional/technical/business writing pedagogies. The thrust of those pedagogies, echoing the goal of preparation that I find problematic, appears to be towards preparing students to engage in the kinds of writing tasks that will constitute their work lives after college.

Regardless of the specific theoretical frames within which ethnographic writing is situated in these accounts (in any accounts for that matter), there are some common features of ethnographic writing we can see across ethnographic pedagogies. In a nutshell, these features are ethnographers’ ways of showing the importance (I would go as far as to say crucial-ness) of rendering the contexts in which the writing happens and from which it emerges. Most obvious is the use of narrative as the primary style of presentation. Narrative-writing is deeply embedded in the history of ethnographic writing; moreover, much ethnographic theory turns to narrative and description as responses to positivist, decontextualized accounts of phenomena. Along similar lines, ethnographic writing tends to include substantial amounts of dialogue and physical/sensory detail. Because ethnography works inductively, ethnographic writing tends not to be thesis-driven, delaying claims/assessments until readers have seen the descriptions from which they’re drawn. Finally, especially for teachers of ethnographic writing who are interested in postmodern theory, texts tend to feature self-reflexive situating moves in which students think through the implications of their engagements with their sites.

In very large part, and not surprisingly, published accounts of ethnographic pedagogies tend to situate their arguments in whatever disciplinary debates were current. For example, in the midst of debates over postmodernism and the disciplinary status of composition, James Zebroski (“Rewriting”) argues that ethnographic writing (by both students and teachers) blurs “killer dichotomies” (Ann Berthoff’s term that Kate Ronald and Hepzibah Roskelley use to structure their anthology *Farther Along*).
between teaching and research and between students and teachers (and, tangentially to that particular debate but useful for this argument, between researchers and participants in ethnographic projects). Likewise, in the midst of debates over how the field might/should value “personal” versus “academic” writing, Matthew Wilson argues that ethnographic writing, which is inherently “intersubjective” (Clifford, Predicament), makes the personal/academic distinction irrelevant.

Other descriptions of ethnographic pedagogies have attached ethnographic writing to the project(s) of critical theory: Lester Faigley’s micro-ethnography assignment that he discusses in Fragments of Rationality; Zebroski and Nancy Mack’s “Ethnographic Writing for Critical Consciousness”; Richard Miller’s “Not Just Story-Collecting”; and Linda Brodkey’s “Writing Critical Ethnographic Narratives.” Although the specific assignments in each of these texts are very different, taken together they argue that ethnographic writing supports the critical agenda of teaching students to understand, negotiate, and resist various subject-positions into which they are placed as members of various cultures.

There’s certainly a value to assignments that encourage students’ discovering, articulating and resisting their subject-positions, but what might happen if we tried to go further in articulating the political possibilities of ethnography, i.e., articulating an action-oriented pedagogy that moved toward changing structures of domination instead of (or in addition to) resisting them? In none of these assignments is there any sense that students are producing anything but critique; moreover, there’s no sense that anybody besides classmates and their teachers are seeing their texts. Some ethnographic writing advocates begin articulating more proactive interventions, particularly Miriam Dempsey Page and Mack. Page’s “Clifford Geertz and Beyond: The Interpretive Interview/Essay and Reflexive Ethnography” situates the agency of ethnographic writing in a particular kind of ethnographic practice:

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 . . . . 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.” (11-12)

Getting “inside ‘lived experience’” requires more than simply representing participants’ points of view fairly. In addition, writers must also participate in “exchange,” or “gift-giving” with participants, so that both researchers and participants are transformed in the ethnographic process. If writers and participants exchange and share life experiences, each of them benefits from the process. However, in the end, Page, who is trained as an anthropologist, risks minimizing the value of ethnographic interventions in an effort to account for epistemological problems with traditional ethnographic writing. Following from Clifford (“Partial”), Stephen Tyler and Vincent Crapanzano among others, ethnographic writing should always be construed as “fiction” in order to circumvent the genre’s problematic claims to scientific authority. Following these authors’ logic, reading ethnographic writing as fiction certainly enables some kinds of critique that aren’t available to scientific writing; nevertheless, doing so also complicates the ethos of writers and their texts.

Like Page, Mack is interested in ethnographic writing as a means of improving the lives of both students and participants. Arguing in “Writing for Change: When Motive Matters” that traditional research writing turns students into docile bodies (to borrow Foucault’s phrase), she claims:

Yes, I want students to become better writers just like every administrator and trustee would expect, but I don’t want to change students into better writers so they can pass some proficiency test or pass a course requirement for a professor who hasn’t written anything of substance for twenty years. We must be careful not to reify the institution into having needs larger than those of the people it serves. I want students to become better writers so they can change their world with words. (20)

Mack’s pedagogy seeks to transform students as writers by incorporating three kinds of writing assignments on any topic: “active critique,” “ethnographic inquiry,” and “local advocacy” (21-22). Students begin by reading published texts on an issue they’re interested in; they then conduct ethnography in their local setting; they finish by using what they’ve learned from those activities to articulate a way of solving whatever problem they’ve identified. Mack claims that

Ethnographic observations, informant interviews and reflective writing about personal experience can be paired with reading expert texts. The knowledge acquired through ethnographic research can help the students to gain power in relation to the sage texts. (21)

Students become experts in their local cultures, which elevates their power as knowledge-makers. Moreover, using ethnographic writing to reposition themselves relative to “sage texts,” and then writing from that new subject-position in order to advocate solutions to local problems, dramatically transforms traditional student subjects into activists who enact writing as agency for social change.
Of all the texts that advocate ethnographic writing, Mack's comes closest to suggesting that this kind of assignment constitutes interventions into lived experience. However, even in Mack's course (and the same is true for McComiskey's course in which some students do ethnographic writing on work experiences), the intervention comes not during the course of the ethnography itself, but as a result of it. In other words, the process of doing ethnographic participant-observation, for Mack and McComiskey, isn't the process of intervening. Instead, the intervention happens after the fact, once the students have learned whatever they need to know in order to advocate certain positions or practices.

RADICAL ANTHROPOLOGY AS GRASSROOTS INTERVENTION

An extensive debate in anthropology, beginning with Dell Hymes' *Reinventing Anthropology*—running through the postmodern turn of the middle 1980s and more recently in feminist responses to postmodernism—has criticized the impact of academic disciplinary apparatuses on the possibilities for social change when ethnography happens under the rubrics of traditional research. However, by resituting ethnographic practices of writing, reading and researching as collaborations oriented towards grassroots democratic activism, the problems that ethnography has incurred within the disciplines of anthropology and sociology are (at least) less urgent, if not irrelevant.

I draw support—or perhaps more precisely, inspiration—for activism in ethnographic writing from these traditions. Each operates in a different political trajectory: radical anthropology is explicitly cultural materialist; postmodern ethnography is grounded in poststructural critical theory; and the particular feminist work I'm interested in is grounded in a pragmatic concern for the well-being of marginalized peoples. Although each of these approaches is problematic in certain ways, taken together they present a way of seeing ethnography and ethnographic writing as political acts that share a common commitment to using fieldwork and writing to critique and subvert structures of domination.

The primary motivating force behind *Reinventing Anthropology* is the fight against imperialism—both imperialism embedded in ethnographic practices and imperialism in whose service ethnography gets used—a fight now called the "war on terrorism" that continues more than thirty years after the book's first publication. Eric Wolf writes that the current period of the military-industrial complex

is characterized by two opposing and yet interconnected trends. The first of these is the growth of a war machine which is becoming the governing mechanism of our lives. . . . On the other hand, the pacific or pacified objects of our investigation,

primitives and peasants alike, are ever more prone to define our field situation gun in hand . . . . Thus the problem of power has suddenly come to the fore for us; and it exists in two ways—as power exerted within our own system and as power exerted from the outside, often against us, by populations we so recently thought incapable of renewed assertion and resistance. (257-258)

Wolf advocates a transformation of ethnography away from the ontological, i.e., describing ways of being in the world, and towards the activist, i.e., moving the world towards political, social, and economic justice. It's not enough, in other words, for anthropology to serve a conservative, i.e., protective, function only—what William White calls a "museum" function. Gerald Berreman agrees:

We do not know enough to justify a claim to an exclusive truth about mankind or even to knowing how to acquire one. We can have an impact—I hope a humane impact—but it must be by the example of our honesty and humanity and by the consequences of our works; it cannot be as a result of insisting on our infallibility or the absolute nature of our discovery of truth. (87)

Wolf extends Berreman's argument by claiming that increased attention to methodical issues in the field marks "a descent into triviality and irrelevance" (261), a claim that resonates with Johnson's argument against the "codification of knowledges" in cultural studies.

While there are several attempts in the collection to articulate responses to this critique, probably the most specific comes from Laura Nader, who argues that one way to subvert both ethnography's tendency to imperialize and the dominance of groups in power is to study dominant groups as well as studying dominated groups. "If we look at the literature based on field work in the United States," she explains,

we find a relatively abundant literature on the poor, the ethnic groups, the disadvantaged; there is comparatively little field research on the middle class and very little first-hand work on the upper classes . . . Studying "up" as well as "down" would lead us to ask many "common sense" questions in reverse. Instead of asking why some people are so poor, we would ask why other people are so affluent? How on earth would a social scientist explain the hoarding patterns of the American rich and middle class? (289)

The goal of aggressively inverting the questions that have positioned ethnography as an impartial practice isn't just to save ethnography for ethnographers. The goal is to refigure ethnographic practices so they help citizens participate in democratic life:

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A democratic framework implies that citizens should have access to decision-makers, institutions of government, and so on. I believe that anthropologists would be surprisingly good at applying their descriptive and analytical tools to a major problem: How can a citizenry function in a democracy when that citizenry is woefully ignorant of how the society works and doesn’t work, of how a citizen can “plug in” as a citizen, or what would happen should citizens begin to exercise rights other than voting as way to make the “system” work for them? (294-95)

Obviously there are material problems for ethnographers who choose to “study up.” Nader is acutely aware that many if not most dominant groups won’t be happy about throwing their doors open to researchers who want to expose their inner workings. But she seems convinced of two things: 1) that with enough persistence, a good researcher can gain access to pretty much any site; and 2) that the potential outcomes of the research make it worth the work it takes to get access.

Whereas Nader’s main point is that ethnographers need to rethink their sites for political reasons, Robert Jay argues that ethnographers need to enter a relationship that doesn’t relegate awareness of power relations to published ethnographic texts, and differs from the critical relationship Nader advocates. Instead:

In future field work I shall place first a mutual responsibility to my whole self and to those I go to learn from, in agreement with my desire to relate to them as full equals, personal and intellectual. I shall try to use my relationships with them to find out what topics are relevant to each of us, to be investigated through what questions and what modes of questioning, and for what kinds of knowledge. I should wish to make the first report for them, in fact with them; indeed it may be that written reports would seem to us redundant. (379)

Jay describes a relationship that is inherently collaborative, which is substantially different from what any other contributor to the collection suggests. Moreover, the result of this kind of collaborative relationship may well be that the anthropologist never writes up or publishes the results of her work outside the site.

In the end, Reinventing Anthropology presents less of a program for ways to do ethnography than some ways of seeing ethnography as a positive force for democracy. Contributors disagree over the best kinds of relationships for researchers and participants to enter into; the extent to which ethnographic research needs to assimilate itself to other kinds of academic research endeavors; the extent to which the practices of ethnography are tied to the discipline of anthropology; and so on. But across the board, these ethnographers are committed to finding ways for their practices to extend and strengthen democracy rather than to subvert or destroy it.

**Reenvisioning the Politics of Postmodern Ethnography**

I can’t imagine that too many ethnographers (or anybody else for that matter) would set themselves in opposition to the goal of strengthening democracy. But the texts in Reinventing Anthropology don’t seem to have found much of an audience, within or outside of anthropology. George Marcus and Michael Fischer dismiss the collection this quickly:

Earlier, in the United States, a volume of critique also appeared, Reinventing Anthropology. In retrospect, this volume is very much a document of the moment, when much of academia was temporarily radicalized, and given to a rhetoric of revolutionary change in response to the Vietnam War and domestic turmoil. While the aim of the critique in this volume was often true, the overall effort was too immediate and ungrounded in practice to have much effect. (34-35)

Marcus has continued to level this critique, specifically at the work of Nader. In Ethnography through Thick and Thin, Marcus argues that Nader’s work is too “oppositional,” and that making “moral judgments” about elites essentializes them in the same way that Nader accuses imperialist ethnography of essentializing traditional participants (27-28). However, the struggles that ethnography has faced in general over the last twenty years regarding imperialism and essentialization seem, rather than a fatal problem, to present important opportunities to engage ethnographers—and writing students, and writing teachers—in grassroots democratic action that locates the work of activism in the processes of writing and reading.

Among projects that have been taken up in composition and literacy studies, while there have been a significant number of ethnographies over the last twenty years or so, there have been only a few ethnographies that present direct interventions into the lives of participants as part of the research process itself. For example, Shirley Brice Heath’s Ways with Words is a multi-layered study in which Heath studies residents of two small towns to understand the residents’ understandings of certain language practices; moreover, she works with teachers, intervening into their language practices in order to improve the education that the children of Trackton and Roadville experience. Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater’s Academic Literacies shows a researcher intervening into the classroom practices of teachers as she studies the developmental and pedagogical effects of a writing-across-the-curriculum program. Interestingly, both Heath and Chiseri-Strater, at various points in their texts, sound apologetic for their interventions,
wondering whether the influences they’ve had on their participants has tainted the value of their research.

On the other hand, Ellen Cushman’s The Struggle and the Tools begins from the assertion that researcher intervention into the lives of participants is both inherent in ethnographic research and desirable. As Cushman elaborates her methodological position, she makes two key moves from which an activist ethnographic pedagogy can emerge. First, she invokes the notion of reciprocity, the notion that ethnographers have an ethical responsibility to improve the lives of participants in return for the professional benefits researchers get from doing and publishing the work. Second, she positions herself from the beginning of the study as a colleague of her participants. Cushman argues that her ethnic and class backgrounds enable her to do more than sympathize with her participants; instead, because she straddles the border between communities traditionally construed as underprivileged (working-class, Native-American) and communities traditionally construed as privileged (white-looking, academic), she can work with her participants on the problems that constitute the central focuses of her project.

What Cushman doesn’t do is connect these two arguments. The possibilities for mutually beneficial relations in fieldwork seem to multiply when the researcher enters the site as a collaborator (not just a collaborative author, which has been strongly advocated and problematized in the research literature), i.e., as a participant in the experiences of the culture. When a qualitative researcher enters a site in order to participate in the work that organizes the site, the collaborative stance she begins from helps us rethink the colonialist critique that many formulations of reciprocity draw. Rather than constructing researcher-participant relations as a mutual giving and receiving (or, more cynically, as bribing “natives” into doing and saying what we want them to), these relations are constructed as collective action, which is how Cushman justifies her involvement in helping participants search for housing, prepare for job interviews, interact with government officials, and explore college options. She also reciprocates by turning over all royalties from the book to the residents of Quayville.

Cushman further establishes a collaborative relationship with her participants by asking/encouraging them to work with her on the production of her ethnographic text. She’s certainly not the first ethnographer to ask participants to read drafts or to work through data with her; however, taken together with the relationships she develops with the residents of Quayville, the end result is a text written together by people who worked together to improve their living conditions in important and immediate ways.

My goal in pursuing this discussion of professional qualitative research in composition and literacy studies is twofold. 1) it’s important to see that this kind of ethnographic writing is already in the discipline, although not necessarily as pedagogy; 2) Cushman’s project in particular demonstrates the positive impact that a researcher can have on the lives of her participants by working with and writing with them. It’s this dimension of ethnography, the importance of the writing, with which I want to end.

Researchers and theorists who have followed debates in anthropology, and composition/literacy researchers who have brought those debates to our field’s attention, have carefully articulated the perils and problems of ethnography. The argumentation tends to focus on protecting, on not damaging, participants, rather than on how to use the writing for their benefit. In large part, the terms of this debate emerge from postmodern anthropologists Clifford, Marcus, Michael Fischer, Renato Rosaldo, and others who described the crisis of representation in anthropology in the mid-1980s, as well as responses from feminist researchers like Marjory Wolf.

Postmodern anthropologists have problematized ethnography to the point that Marcus has declared its end. Wolf responds:

Such a renunciation hardly seems ethical when one considers how often authoritarian regimes control information in and out, information about living conditions, for example, that might be relevant to the survival of some groups and some ideas. There is a curious postmodern politics that condemns us for our individual colonialist attitudes but remains aloof from the often bloody results of oppressive governments, of the left and the right. (6)

For Wolf, the primary goal of anthropology is to work for the benefit of participants, and that socially responsible research focuses on participants whose social status is low. While it’s important to note that Wolf is a feminist, which means that her work focuses on representing and benefiting oppressed or disempowered woman, her main principle should apply across race, class, and gender boundaries. Wolf argues further that the crisis of representation and its proposed solutions (various forms of experimental ethnographic writing—ethnographic fictions, ethnopoetics, etc.) alienate the very participants the research is designed to benefit:

Our [feminist anthropologists’] agenda, whether we are engaged in adding to the descriptive material on women’s experience or in building theory, is to expose the unequal distribution of power that has subordinated women in most if not all cultures and discover ways of dismantling hierarchies of domination. If our writings are not easily accessible to those who share our goals, we have failed. (119)

And again:

Experimental ethnography[,] so obscure that native speakers of English with a Ph.D. in anthropology find it difficult to
understand[,] is written for a small elite made up primarily of first-world academics with literary inclinations. The message of exclusion that attaches to some of these texts contradicts the ostensible purpose of experimental ethnography, to find better ways of conveying some aspect of the experiences of another community. (138)

Writ large, Wolf’s point is this: ethnography is most worthwhile when it engages researchers and participants in projects that lead to the production, distribution, and consumption of writing that is ethical, careful, readable, and useful not just for the researchers’ professional communities, but also for anybody else implicated in the projects’ problems or solutions.

Although Wolf doesn’t frame her argument within rhetoric or composition, her logic critiques anthropology for inscribing a relationship between institutional/disciplinary boundaries and writing that echoes my critique of cultural studies pedagogies. The pedagogies of Berlin, Schilb, Trimbur, and McComiskey situate student writing within academic institutions; in many cases, the kinds of theoretical languages they invoke, and the kinds of topics/issues they engage, remove them from the discourses in which they must try to operate—discourses that produce mass resistance to structures of domination. Wolf’s point, that the writing we do needs to be accessible and valuable to the members of the cultures/institutions that constitute its subjects, tells us to set aside overly academic theoretical discourses and teach writing that involves students and their research participants in projects that directly intervene in and contribute to grassroots democratic processes.

If one of our goals—if not our major goal—is to work with students to produce writing that matters, an ethnographic writing pedagogy that engages these politics and ethics offers a way to do just that. When ethnographic writers consider not just the institutional but also the material implications of their processes, i.e., not just course credit, grades and skills but also the lives and well-being of participants in their research, students do more than prepare for some future good they might do someday, somewhere. Yes, they learn methods of writing, thinking and researching they can use in other venues, but the work they do in the process takes on a value that doesn’t have to wait for some abstract future before they can realize it.1

West Chester, Pennsylvania

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