



PROJECT MUSE®

Ethnographic Artifacts: Challenges to a Reflexive
Anthropology (review)

Claudia Gross

The Contemporary Pacific, Volume 15, Number 1, Spring 2003, pp. 211-214
(Review)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cp.2003.0008>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/38584>

that can be variably in cooperation or conflict; recognizing that, like all social relations, colonial situations can be a matter of negotiation rather than simple oppression; attending to emergent cultural forms; and placing all studies in a comparative historical context” (Ogan, 194).

For the most part, the book is effective. Certainly, the data presented are fascinating; the stories told, often compelling. Nonetheless, these articles remain somewhat too sketchy for my ethnographic tastes. None accomplishes a fully convincing anthropology of colonial situations. To be sure, such an accomplishment would be difficult in a short piece. After all—and as the volume implies—to be fully convincing means evidencing as well as articulating three related processes: (1) the ongoing social engagements between culturally different peoples; (2) the complex cultural understandings and misunderstandings that, sometimes, could serve the different interests of all; (3) the various manners in which the colonists (granted, a diverse bunch) did, in fact, frequently wield their greater power to serve themselves (including by propounding their ideas about development) rather than to serve the locals (diverse as well). Many of the articles successfully evidence only one—and not the range—of these processes. And (somewhat correspondingly), the articulations are simply not consistently, adequately worked through. The volume’s juxtaposition of articles undoubtedly creates a whole greater than the sum of its parts—takes us closer to an understanding of the ways social life was constituted and experienced in colonial New Guinea.

But, again, it does not take us all the way there. Hence, I cannot help but look forward to fuller versions of the articles—versions that the data, the stories, and the important topic more than warrant.

FREDERICK ERRINGTON
Trinity College

* * *

Ethnographic Artifacts: Challenges to a Reflexive Anthropology, edited by Sjoerd R Jaarsma and Marta A Rohatynskyj. Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2000. ISBN 0-8248-2302-8; viii + 255 pages, notes, bibliography, index. Paper, US\$29.95.

Most contemporary social and cultural anthropologists are well aware of the divided character of ethnography, a practice of creating knowledge and a form of representing it that is foundational to their discipline. Being persons in-between when conducting fieldwork, strangers who also belong, they have double responsibilities when they write, as well. They must take into account the effects of publishing their findings on the communities they study and they must simultaneously address the concerns of the academic discipline to whose body of knowledge they contribute. While perhaps in the past these two sets of audiences and responsibilities could have been kept quite separate, certainly since the end of the colonial period differentials of power have shifted. As citizens of nation states, the people ethnographers study today tend to have more say and control over the parameters of ethnographic research. They also have

better access to the texts ethnographers write and may themselves participate in both audiences. In addition, over the last few decades anthropologists have lost a privileged claim to the attribution, description, and analysis of “culture,” which in the contemporary world is a contested notion with high political currency.

In this volume, social and cultural anthropologists who work on Pacific societies explore ways in which ethnographic texts have effects beyond the purpose of contributing to anthropological knowledge, such as in the relationships between ethnographers and the people they study, in social relations among the people under study, or as vehicles for the construction of their collective identity. The editors ingeniously point to ethnographic texts as “artifacts,” as things in circulation that have a social life of their own. They circulate between ethnographers and diverse constituencies of local host communities and their wider social environment (eg, state institutions, bureaucracies, national elites, the media, and political debates). Furthermore, ethnographic texts circulate in the academic sphere, where they represent their authors as much as the research subjects.

Eight substantial chapters are presented in two parts, framed by the editors’ introduction and a thoughtful, stimulating epilogue by Jonathan Friedman. Part one, “Ethnography as Personal Dilemma,” consists of four chapters on questions of voice and the politics of representation. All show that, contrary to the title, issues of representation are political rather than simply personal. Ethnographers make decisions about textual representation in the context of the social and politi-

cal relations in which the people they study live and in which they participate and partake, and in the context of the professional social relations in which they as researchers are embedded. The resulting dilemmas ethnographers face call for a reflexivity in seeing themselves, as Friedman puts it, “not as mere subjects, but as social beings in a socially structured context” (207). Rather than mere subjects, in other words, ethnographers are what in anthropology are known as “persons.” By reflecting on themselves as persons, ethnographers can make explicit their own involvement in these various social and political relations as well as their participation in the narratives they produce. Reflecting on oneself as a person is more than self-reflection, but also a reflection on how one is perceived by others and how one figures in their lives—who one is to the community of people one studies.

In one of the most accomplished chapters, Niko Besnier reflects on his responsibilities toward people on Nukulaelae atoll (Tuvalu), both when conducting fieldwork and when writing. Given his awareness of differing versions of events, of relationships between people with contesting voices and interests, of the benefit drawn from people’s propensity to gossip, he makes explicit how the decisions ethnographers make concerning representing voices and events in their writing are political choices with political implications. Underlying this is the important question of precisely who is the “community” toward whom an ethnographer has responsibilities.

Toon van Meijl addresses issues of representation through an account

of tribulations during his fieldwork among Tainui Māori of New Zealand and the controversy over the publication of his doctoral dissertation, in which he took a political stance that led to a rift between himself and parts of the Tainui leadership. The wider concerns here are issues of advocacy in ethnographic research. Van Meijl largely externalizes the conflict and hardly deals with his part in the construction of his identity and the relationships he formed. Also, to negotiate and make decisions regarding whether and how to write about and thus make public aspects of a community's life that are secret, problematic, or a source of political tension or sorrow, is part of the hard work of ethnographic writing. This account is unsatisfactory, because the author portrays himself as a victim of the political interests of his research subjects, without offering much reflection on his own agency and involvement in being expected to act as an advocate.

Two chapters consider the workings of the academic community. Michael Goldsmith analyzes structures and social relations evident at the annual meetings of the Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania and how these presuppose and posit expertise. He criticizes the idea that an ethnographer's knowledge is tied to a place and implicit assumptions that culture equals a people equals a place. This is a subtle analysis of an academic event and its effect on the kind of texts ethnographers are compelled to write. Grant McCall's chapter charts ethnographers' anticipation of audiences when constructing their texts, primarily by discussing aspects of performance and impression manage-

ment involved in presenting papers to academic audiences.

Part two, "Regarding Ethnography," provides discussions of ethnography as a corpus of knowledge. Judith Macdonald eloquently traces Raymond Firth's work and its reception among Tikopia, which pays tribute to Firth's ethnographic sensitivity. She writes about her own prefiguration as a succeeding ethnographer among Tikopia and the impact Firth's writings had on Tikopia cultural identity. As most students will have a predecessor in their field, they will benefit from this reflection. Sjoerd Jaarsma deals with dominant tropes in the ethnographic corpus on the Asmat of Papua Province in Indonesia and issues of authorial authority and historical context pertaining to these characterizations of Asmat culture.

Mary MacDonald discusses "Christian Ethnography" through an account of her work and time at the Melanesian Institute for Pastoral and Socio-Economic Service of Goroka in Papua New Guinea. Here ethnography figures as a tool of evangelization and pastoral care. But it remains unclear what exactly "Christian Ethnography" is, for example, what defines Maurice Leenhardt's *Do Kamo* (1978) as a text of "Christian Ethnography" as MacDonald claims. I find problematic in this context the lack of any discussion of truth and ethnography, or of faith and truth, for that matter. It seems to me that there is a fundamental difference between an account of "God revealed through the experience of culture" (171) and a cultural and social analysis of "God."

Martha Rohatynskij analyzes negative qualities that diverse writers historically attributed to Baining peo-

ple in Papua New Guinea and their alleged inferior culture. Among others, she traces events and texts that influenced Gregory Bateson's early sojourn among Baining. Existing negative attributions, a bad reputation, and false expectations contributed to his aborting fieldwork and complaining about Baining being uncommunicative and having a drab existence. Rather than finding fault with Baining, subsequent ethnographers learned to work with a better-adjusted notion of culture. Rohatynskij demonstrates how other textual representations (eg, government and missionary reports, journalistic accounts), as well as non-textual representations such as the reputation a people have among their neighbors, circulate alongside ethnographic texts and help to shape them.

The editors bring to our minds the idea of ethnographies as artifacts in circulation, which opens up innovative ways of thinking about the intrinsic complexities of ethnography as a knowledge practice. The editors' introduction and organization of the volume, however, do not succeed in bringing together as a whole the diverse, fragmented chapters. The introduction also lacks both the clarity of expression and the scope one hopes to find. For example, the discussion of reflexivity in anthropology is limited (striking omissions are influences of feminist literature and Bourdieu on reflexivity, and for the Pacific, Linda Tuhiwai Smith's *Decolonizing Methodologies* [1999]); and their uncritical use of the term "native" is problematic.

The editors discuss the apparent crisis of representation in ethnography primarily through the issue that "they read what we write," that is, the fact

that in a more globalized world members of the communities under study have access to the texts ethnographers produce and often demand a more considered if not collaborative approach. However, the ethical and political problems that ethnographers must come to terms with pertain, whether or not research subjects have access to ethnographers' writings. They also pertain when ethnographers publish in languages with which the people they write about are not familiar; when they work with communities where people lack the proficiency to read ethnographies critically, rather than merely grasp the gist of them; and in situations without imposed research protocols and textual controls. Recent debates in anthropology show that these problems have been intrinsic to the practice of ethnography from the beginning.

How experience, acts of communication, and social relationships are transformed into texts that claim validity and truthfulness; how the communicative, social, and historical conditions of ethnographic knowledge are represented; and how the effects of research on communities can be negotiated are epistemological and methodological conundrums notwithstanding "their" reading "our" texts. And the fact that "they" not only read but also talk back should be taken as opportunity for continuing conversation and improved understanding, that is, for participation in the same world as the coevals "they" and "we" are in the field, a world of multiple authors and multiple representations.

CLAUDIA GROSS
University of Auckland

* * *