



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## Jesus in America and Other Stories from the Field

Claudia Gould

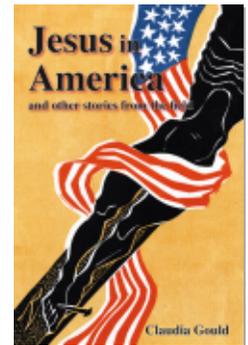
Published by Utah State University Press

Gould, Claudia.

Jesus in America and Other Stories from the Field.

Utah State University Press, 2009.

Project MUSE.[muse.jhu.edu/book/9401](https://muse.jhu.edu/book/9401).



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/9401>

# Foreword

Lee Haring

Readers of novels won't let fiction be fiction; they want it to give them fact. The most degrading habit of radio or television interviewers is urging some novelist like Philip Roth to admit that his characters are "really" disguised versions of characters he has known. We first use novels, of course, to find out whether there's anybody else out there, but our second, lifelong use for them is anthropological. Novels and short stories are windows through which we observe other people's "manners, customs, observances, superstitions" (W. J. Thoms's constituents of folklore). Conversely, when readers think, *anthropology should be anthropology*, they mean the writer should conform to a rhetoric they recognize: an encyclopedia-article summary of people's customs, geographic situation, and economic circumstances, followed by extended analyses of kinship relations, preferably in tabular form. When Carlos Castaneda began publishing his series of pseudoanthropological narratives in the 1960s, readers were divided. One set were beguiled by the appropriateness of the teachings of Don Juan to their spiritual needs; the other set, much smaller, said, "Where is the group for whom this character speaks? Where are any tokens of real field experience?" Evidently "the traditional rationalistic and scientific paradigms" (Kremer 1992, 201) needed just such a challenge as Castaneda posed, to enable a new hybrid to become part of the accepted genre system.

*Ethnographic fiction* is a phrase rather like *deconstruction*, something people quickly acquire so that they can make their own abusive definition of it, then use it as a weapon against those they don't agree with. They can take a concept or image some professional uses, which the critic thinks is contrived or lacking a real referent, and dismiss it in statements like "culture is itself an ethnographic fiction." Internal to the discipline of anthropology is the equally contemptuous use of the phrase to mean something formerly

accepted by professionals, but now exploded, like the supposed ignorance of non-Western people about where babies come from.

That is not the ethnographic fiction in this book. Seen more correctly, ethnographic fiction is a technique for recasting field notes. An author uses the familiar rhetoric of the short story or novel as a means of palatably conveying what was discovered in the field. The classic example, assigned to many anthropology students before the genre got its name, is *Return to Laughter*, Laura Bohannan's novel about the Tiv in Nigeria. For it she adopted the pseudonym Elenore Smith Bowen, so that no colleague, dean, or student would think she was offering such an engaging, well-written fiction as "real" ethnography. But "real" field experience lay behind it, as it does behind the stories in this book. Then instructors began assigning Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, whose author, in an admirable exposé of cultural convergence, quite deliberately addressed readers with information about Igbo culture. Once instructors had become accustomed to this generic boundary-crossing, they were able to perceive Zora Neale Hurston as its pioneer. Whereas Hurston obliges her reader to notice how involved she is with her informants, Claudia Gould limits her visibility. In a partly autobiographical Afterword, she reveals that these are "her people," in the precise sense of that phrase that they would understand: her relatives and their neighbors in Morganton, North Carolina. In fact, her choice to write fiction, rather than a monograph on "the place of Protestant Christianity in the lives of North Carolinians," manifests her dedication to her extended family and others. She makes the difficult decision not to write "straight" ethnography, because she can bring more of herself to serve them through writing fiction.

But hasn't fiction always been ethnographic? What is *Robinson Crusoe* if not a study in unaccommodated man, recreating a class-based society? Balzac consigned an entire writing life to his ethnography of the emerging Paris bourgeoisie, initially calling it "Studies of Customs." Flaubert proclaimed himself an ethnographer of Rouen in his subtitle *Scenes of Provincial Life*. To update Balzac, whilst narrowing the population being studied (in harmony with contemporary anthropological trends), became the mission of Marcel Proust in the Faubourg Saint-Antoine. Among British novelists (Fielding and Trollope leap to mind as reporters from the provinces), the most outspoken ethnographer is Dickens, whose Mr. and Mrs. Veneering "were bran-new people in a bran-new house in a bran-new quarter of London. Everything about the Veneerings

was spick and span new. All their furniture was new, all their friends were new, all their servants were new, their plate was new, their carriage was new, their harness was new, their horses were new, their pictures were new, they themselves were new . . . .” Thomas Hardy soon explained the method: “Under the general name of ‘Egdon Heath,’ which has been given to the sombre scene of the story [*The Return of the Native*], are united or typified heaths of various real names . . . .” It’s commonplace for readers now to look for and find the precise geography in *Ulysses*, the intellectual history in *The Mandarins*, the ferocious sociology in *Main Street*, and the nostalgic biographical-literary history in *A Moveable Feast*. Claudia Gould, insisting by her example that realistic fictions are a legitimate genre of scientific writing, expands the concept of ethnographic fiction.

In “A Red Crayon,” for example, the images of hellfire and brimstone purveyed in church are not merely a metonym for child-beating, which the community’s values accept as a legitimate part of the duty of a churchgoing father. The images are themselves the abuse, in both this story and “Jack at the Mercy Seat.” The girl (the narrator as child) who has borrowed a crayon from Sunday school comes to feel like “the biggest sinner in the world.” But the author does not oversimplify. Abusive childrearing in these two dimensions isn’t accepted by everyone in the community. Neither the girl’s mother nor her Sunday school teacher participates in the girl’s self-condemnation; the mother takes the child out of Sunday school, and ever after, the narrator has stayed away from church. This is a divided community, then, even in the religion its members think is their truest basis for unity.

Expanding the discipline of anthropology by incorporating social criticism, psychology, and sociology of religion with her own self-fashioning, Claudia Gould firmly situates herself as a creative writer who works from ethnographic and autobiographical materials. As part of her expanding program, she addresses the old belief that to tell a story must mean some sort of resistance to ethnographic reality. Now that narrativity has become a viable, indeed central term in much criticism (Ricoeur 1985; Greimas 1970, 1983; Herman 1999), the chink in the wall is growing larger. Through her pieces, she contends that the familiar short-story style, without postmodern derangements of time or switchings of point of view, will evoke the reader’s traditional expectation, based on realism, that here’s a way to find out what these people are like. Her method calls up the feature of her subjects that people most often expect from folklore, an

orientation to the past. "Personal Storage," for instance, portrays a woman who can't be distracted by financial troubles from her attachment to her old furniture and family papers. Where her treasure is, there is her heart also (Matthew 6:21). The reader, identifying with the Farm Home Administration worker who passes on her story, is as appalled as he is; conflicts of value, we see, are part of the manners and customs of this population. Claudia Gould invents a monologue that captures the social reality of this imagined character's attachment to the past, a character who is not a folksinger, storyteller, or quilter, but no less a product of Southern culture.

The author reveals the past orientation of her people most clearly, through the story "Jack at the Mercy Seat," when she crosses her own boundary, reproducing in her Afterword the spoken words of the original of her character Jack. That is, only at the end of her book does she supply the quotation that would be the main component of a conventional folkloric account. Starting backward from that testimony, Jack's whole life is seen in retrospect, back to his early church experiences. Then, in wartime, the images of hellfire from those days come back to him. A superhuman visitation from a devil-like figure leads him through fear to salvation, a step which takes him down the path of imagining his wife's adultery, abusing her physically, being rejected by her, and supposing he can patch it up. Drunkenness, his own adultery, shiftlessness, fighting, drifting, and apparent bigamy bring him in the end to church. His story stops before he gives testimony.

The author's sociological statement here about southern Protestant Christianity is so strong that a reader might miss the folkloric elements: the fantasy about kamikaze pilots, the ethnic slur ("the Japs were crazy"), or the folk-speech word *mistake* for an unplanned child. Framing Jack's life retrospectively is a sufficiently complicated device to do him and his people justice. Claudia Gould's response to the intractable complexity of church culture in North Carolina is to show in fiction the varieties of pressure the past exerts on her people's present. An obvious goal of her stories is to affirm the central role of Protestant religion in American life, but the sociology serves the fiction.

Part of the complication she engages is the question a reader can get distracted from, "Who is speaking?" Ruth, in "The Mountains of Spices," speaks for herself; we don't know whether she speaks for her author. Claudia Gould captures here a moment in Southern Christian history when an independent daughter could internalize

Scripture in a way the previous generation didn't practice (for example, Scripture doesn't touch the families' racism). The author captures that moment through a generational conflict. Gender, race, and class have placed Ruth in a situation she escapes by making Scripture real for herself, regarding herself as worthy to make her own plans, and being willing to pay the price of departing from the "family values" of two families. Thus she contributes to the fragmentation of an American family, resigning herself to repeating what is, after all, the most ancient American pattern, uprooting and resettling elsewhere. Thus she speaks for a new, personalized Christianity, while her author enacts the notion of "intersectionality" in the converging effects of religion, gender, and class.

The recent past of American folklore studies has been blessed with many innovative contributions by female scholars (Kapchan 1993; Magliocco 2004; Turner 2009; Lawless 1988; Lawless 1993). An especially successful nonfictional alternative to Claudia Gould's ethnographic fiction is Margaret K. Brady's *Mormon Healer and Folk Poet*, in which, out of scraps of information and by demonstrating the interdisciplinary character of folklore, the author creates a completed portrait of a classic folkloric character, a nobody who becomes somebody through Brady's research (Brady 2009). Closer to these short stories, in the sort of fieldwork involved, is a notable study by Margaret Yocom of members of her family. Amongst them she finds a "private sphere of women's personal experience narratives" as "a mode of social interaction, a space where none need fear ridicule or embarrassment" (Yocom 1985, 52). These authors exemplify the attraction felt in folklore studies for what might be called "submerged populations"—which is the phrase the great Frank O'Connor used to point to the invisible characters that the short-story genre prefers. Such are the characters explored and created by Claudia Gould, in Laurel ("A Moment of Rapture") and in Ruth and her mother ("The Mountains of Spices"). She does not ignore the inescapable awkwardness of male-female interaction, for instance when the Farm Home Administration man in "Personal Storage" has to reproduce the story of a woman he can't hope to understand deeply, as if he were a folklorist without knowing it.

In-between spaces are familiar, in a world where cultures continually converge and expectations are continually surprised. Claudia Gould's reader comfortably occupies such a space.

## Bibliography

- Brady, Margaret K. *Mormon Healer and Folk Poet: Mary Susannah Fowler's Life of "Unselfish Usefulness"*. Logan: Utah State University Press, 2009.
- Greimas, Algirdas Julien. *Du sens; essais sémiotiques*. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1970.
- Herman, David, ed. *Narratologies: New Perspectives on Narrative Analysis*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1999.
- Kapchan, Deborah A. *Gender on the Market: Moroccan Women and the Revoicing of Tradition*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993.
- Kremer, Jürgen W. "Lifework Carlos Castaneda." *Re-Vision* 14 (1992): 195–203.
- Lawless, Elaine J. *Handmaidens of the Lord: Pentecostal Women Preachers and Traditional Religion*. Publications of the American Folklore Society., vol. 9. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988.
- . *Holy Women, Wholly Women: Sharing Ministries of Wholeness Through Life Stories and Reciprocal Ethnography*. Publications of the American Folklore Society. New Series. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993.
- Magliocco, Sabina. *Witching Culture: Folklore and Neo-Paganism in America*. Contemporary Ethnography. Philadelphia, Pa.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004.
- Ricoeur, Paul. *Time and Narrative*. Vol. 2. Translated by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985.
- Turner, Patricia A. *Crafted Lives: Stories and Studies of African American Quilters*. With a foreword by Kyra E. Hicks. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009.
- Yocom, Margaret R. "Woman to Woman: Fieldwork and the Private Sphere." In *Women's Folklore, Women's Culture*, edited by Rosan A. Jordan and Susan J. Kalčik, 45–53. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985.