

"THAT DAMN BOOK":
TEN YEARS AFTER WRITING
CULTURE

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This paper assesses the legacy of the *Writing Culture* collection ten years after its appearance. It surveys varieties of response to it by anthropologists and considers the kinds of opportunities it has opened for new critical work in social and cultural anthropology, primarily in the United States. It also suggests areas of opportunity that have been missed. The most productive response to *Writing Culture* is the one that did not view its concerns as narrowly textual, as only a "literary turn", but rather saw its implication for research practice in anthropology at the heart of fieldwork. It is the current debates about fieldwork practice amid new conditions and objects of ethnographic study that are the strongest legacy of the mid-1980s critique of anthropological rhetoric and representation.

I don't think Jim Clifford is famous for his monograph on Leenhardt. I don't think that George Marcus has achieved some notoriety because he worked on Tonga. Indeed, I don't know anybody who's read the ethnography he wrote. In fact, I've often talked to people and asked them, "Hey, have you read George Marcus's ethnography?" "No! – but I read that other damn book."

David SCHNEIDER, *Schneider on Schneider* (probably referring to *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*, but could just as well be referring to *Writing Culture*)

After ten years, *Writing Culture* remains a key text that stands for, both symbolically and in its content, a trend of powerful critique in United States academia that continues unabated. This volume has served several functions in the course of this trend. For scholars who wanted to further develop and work from the critique of disciplines, it was one of the texts to get beyond, by critiquing the critique, so to speak, by establishing one's own position by setting oneself often within the critical project that *Writing Culture* represented, but against it specifically. It has thus helped some scholars to develop their own work by their operating in an agonistic mode in relation to it – by pointing out that the writers in this volume were not radical enough in their critique of representation, were not reflexive enough about their own positions, were not feminist enough, were too literary and thus hermetic in their politics, etc. Thus, one establishes the virtue of one's own role as critic, by rhetorically setting aside the influence of *Writing Culture* in some fashion. For others, especially graduate students facing dissertation committees, *Writing Culture* has served more sympathetically as a kind of ironic legitimation for producing work against the authorities of disciplines, which of

course lean heaviest in the course of career-making graduate research projects.

Ten years later, as postmodernist orientations have reconfigured themselves into efforts to institutionalize "cultural studies" – to lend the earlier critiques institutional weight, activist commitment, identity politics, and an orientation to contemporary social changes – *Writing Culture* is still used and cited as one of the precursor texts that continues to orient debates. No new "ism" or positive paradigm of theory has succeeded the critiques of the 1980s and their diverse intellectual capital; rather the trend has been powered by continuing critiques of critiques, with both positive and negative consequences. In such a whirlpool, texts such as *Writing Culture*, rather than being superceded, continue to function dynamically as devices for framing positions and issues.

To appreciate more fully what the influence of *Writing Culture* has been, it is useful to understand its reception in terms of the broader interdisciplinary fervor with which it arose in the 1980s, on one hand, and in terms of changes within the discipline of anthropology itself, on the other. The broad based interdisciplinary trend that swept the humanities and social sciences in the 1980s had as its basis the delayed diffusion of French poststructuralist thought in the United States through the voracious appetite for new perspectives and objects of study in literary studies trying, expansively, to become a wide-ranging, politically relevant cultural studies, along with feminism as the model for what a new academic/social movement should and could be. In this trend, *Writing Culture* represented the alliance between scholars of literature (often comparative literature) refining the theoretical means for undertaking the critique of discourses (particularly modes of realist representation) and cultural anthropologists who understood the critique of their own discursive forms of representing others to be the most powerful means to articulate a self-critique of the discipline that had been brewing in various expressions since at least the 1960s. From the perspective of scholars, trained in other disciplines such as literature, law, architecture, philosophy, history, art and art history, film/media studies, and sociology, and who were themselves participating in the interdisciplinary movement stimulated by literary studies trying to become cultural studies, *Writing Culture* had the following special attractions:

– It became a model of *effective* rhetorical critique that demonstrably shook the established practices and conventions of a discipline and suggested new questions and genres of analysis in the direction of the interdisciplinary movement which inspired it. History, for example, had had much earlier a provocative and systematic critique of its rhetoric by Hayden White, but it failed to have a decisive impact on the research and writing

practice of historians. The relative success of a similar critique in anthropology at a time when the interdisciplinary movement was gaining strength made *Writing Culture* more than just a book focussed on anthropology, but a morale-building exemplar of the transformative possibility of rhetorical critique.

Relatedly, the collective, cooperative effort that produced *Writing Culture*, and the fact that this effort was the result of an interdisciplinary alliance central to the broader movement itself made it particularly attractive as well. It was this cross-disciplinary character that gave it particular strength as a *disciplinary* critique. That is, anthropologists would not have had to take the critique very seriously if it were merely produced by literary scholars seeking imperialistically to expand their interests. Indeed, and quite unfairly, some anthropologists have frequently diminished the cogency of the critique by telling themselves that after all Jim Clifford is not an anthropologist. But they also had to remind themselves that others were involved in the volume with quite strong past credentials as anthropologists. At the same time, the anthropologists involved in the critique could never have carried it off without the sophistication and knowledge of those in the volume, like Clifford, who brought to it previous training in theory, history, and literary studies. It was this collaboration across disciplinary boundaries in the critique of a particular discipline that gave *Writing Culture* a certain exemplary power.

– In the general interdisciplinary movement, *Writing Culture* gave anthropology a progressive voice or position, which it might not otherwise have had, and thus gave it an influence in the general trend that it might not otherwise have had. There were indeed crucial inputs that were desired of anthropology in this trend of postmodernist, and then cultural studies, critique. First, while the critique of ethnographic rhetoric had undermined the notion of its emblematic object of study as "the primitive" or "the exotic", it still authoritatively spoke or wrote for, however qualified by self-critique, the nature of radical difference outside Western contexts. And, I would argue, the figure of the primitive or the exotic remained crucially important in the broader interdisciplinary movement, albeit in nuanced and conflicted ways. Anthropology's struggle with its own object of study, as expressed in *Writing Culture*, kept the "space" of the exotic alive in postmodernist discourses but under severe critique. Maybe not to Edward Said's satisfaction, the self-critique of anthropology did represent in critical discourses the problem of other cultures until it merged, by the early 1990s, with the outpouring of writings in the United States on postcolonialism.

The other aspect of traditional anthropology that was broadly attractive in interdisciplinary arenas was its emblematic method of ethnography,

and this genre and practice of inquiry was of course the focus of *Writing Culture*. The fascination with ethnography exhibited disciplines and an interdisciplinary movement that are fundamentally text-oriented and rely on reading as a research practice derives from an anxiety about lack of connection – empirical and experiential – with the social realities to which their analyses refer. Taking on ethnography as an allied method of inquiry in cultural studies – whether done naively or far too easily from the perspective of anthropological rectitude – is ideologically an important aspect of practice that was given considerable mystique by the elaborate focus and reflection on this genre and method in *Writing Culture*. Again, similar to the trope of the primitive, the simple inspired borrowing of ethnography from anthropology within the trend of interdisciplinary critique would not have worked, but the borrowing of an ethnographic ethos *under strong critique*, such as *Writing Culture* offered, was powerfully attractive.

The fate of *Writing Culture* outside the discipline of anthropology is probably tied to the fate of the interdisciplinary trend of critique in which it was in origin embedded. The 1980s were in the United States a fascinating time for theoretical modes of thought and reflection, a variegated and deep shift in the purposes of scholarship and the nature of knowledge, performed through powerful undoings of authoritative rhetorics. The 1990s are far less interesting in the sense of discovering new theoretical ideas, but the world itself is far more interesting – the stories of globalization, the “new world order”, the much reported demise of the nation-state, *fin-de-siècle* ends and beginnings, the triumph of science and technology in the areas of biogenetics and information, the profound return of fundamentalist religiosity, etc. The challenge is to deploy in committed, original, and patient ways the ideas of the 1980s, but it is very unclear whether there is the will or even inclination to shift modes from the quick surface takes of the *avant-garde* thirst for the new and the shocking, which was definitely the style of the 1980’s interdisciplinary movement in academia, to the much more painstaking and careful exploration of the salience of these same ideas in understanding unfolding events and processes. In this, *Writing Culture* and the ways that it has been received in interdisciplinary trends of critique struggling to maintain their edge remain one bellweather of attitude and possibility among scholars reared in older left/liberal intellectual traditions, but living in politically very conservative, yet dynamically uncertain times.

Within the discipline of anthropology, the story of the reception of *Writing Culture* is more familial, if not tribal. The participants in *Writing Culture* mark a generational transition between an older generation of scholars, who came into their prime in the 1960s, who were trained in the

traditional problems of anthropology, and the traditional social theory which informed it, and younger generations of scholars trained during the 1980s and later, who have been inspired by a completely different set of intellectual references (those connected to the theoretical capital of the then flourishing interdisciplinary trend), who are less certain about the historic project and purpose of anthropology as a discipline, and who certainly conceive of the development of an academic career differently. The anthropological participants in *Writing Culture* certainly shared a traditional sense of the discipline and of the nature of careers in anthropology with the senior generation, but their intellectual references were different (beginning in the 1970s when they were being trained or had taken up their first appointments, they began to read and be inspired by a strikingly different corpus of work than that being offered by their teachers) and were more fully shared with those of the younger generations of anthropologists now in formation. *Writing Culture* thus not only marked a watershed break with past projects in United States anthropology, but it also offered the possibility of multiple experiments with the reinvention of the discipline in line with not only different sets of theories about culture but with changing conditions for the production of knowledge about diverse other peoples and places.

I would say that the experimentation with different sorts of texts and modes of inquiry, heralded as a possibility by *Writing Culture*, that has actually occurred has been quite limited thus far. The theoretical terms in which ethnographies are now written have changed considerably, but actual practices of fieldwork and conventions of writing have not changed much at all. However, the opening for further innovation still exists as does a certain legitimation for experimentation, which certainly did not exist before, and one might argue that a permanent ideological place for a certain inventiveness as well as a different way of looking at the tradition of anthropology has indeed been the substantive contribution of *Writing Culture*, rather than the appearance of a large corpus of venturesome, experimental work following immediately in its wake. In effect, *Writing Culture* has given anthropology, as part of its own permanent self-identity, a capacity for flexibility and change, certainly necessary in a discipline so determined in its origins by a specific historic relationship of Western societies to others, a relationship now in massive transformation.

But why, after such a rousing and inspiring start, was the response in practice so weak (far weaker, for example, in anthropology than in the interdisciplinary arena that *Writing Culture* inspired), at least in my view? Because the possibility suggested by *Writing Culture* was received too narrowly both by those who found it positively influential for their own work and by the broader anthropological community who manifested an am-

bivalent reaction formation that while sympathetic was even more defensive.

The anthropologists who were most positively and directly influenced by the critiques of *Writing Culture* emphasized reflexivity in the practice of anthropological research, and critically examined the historical and political contexts of the conditions for the production of anthropological knowledge. But *those conditions themselves* – the classic *mise en scène* of fieldwork and the core values of the discipline associated with it – have not been the subject of experimentation. Even as the traditional conventions for asserting ethnographic authority in texts have been powerfully critiqued, a new authority for a more critical version of the same conventions – concerned with the politics of fieldwork, the nature of identity, subjectivity, reflexivity, and difference in the fieldwork encounter – has been instantiated. Thus, the most interesting literature to follow *Writing Culture*, caught up in the identity politics of the more recent cultural studies movement, has also been a very narrow literature.

Such an involution upon questions of identity, epistemology, and representation was exactly what mainstream anthropologists feared in the trend that *Writing Culture* marked, which rapidly came to be labelled “postmodern anthropology” – a mode of containment by naming with pejorative intent. The fear among mainstream anthropologists about *Writing Culture* concerned the excessive skepticism that might result from it and thus the potential paralysis of the discipline in second-order, soul-searching, diverting it from its main empiricist mission. Yet, to the great credit of anthropology, which after all had always conducted its inquiries with a strong self-critical orientation by the very fact of its positioning on the boundaries of its own society (the point that *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* tried to develop and enhance), it also received the critique with a good deal of sympathy. Most thought it was at least therapeutic and necessary at that moment in anthropology’s history. As noted, opposition came more in the form of containment out of fear for the more radical implications of the critique rather than rejection, and since the terms in which the *Writing Culture* initiative was contained narrowed the very possibility for new work that it opened, it is worth looking more closely at this particular reaction.

Anthropologists have seemed to be generally satisfied to understand the critique of *Writing Culture* as only about the writing of ethnographic texts in narrowly literary terms. There was a certain positive effect in making anthropologists self-conscious about their rhetoric, but this critique addressed only textual matters and not the empirical method which grounds these – the fieldwork process. This idea that the fieldwork process was untouched by the critique seemed to allay the anxieties of anthropologists

that in fact their core paradigm was being deconstructed or dismantled. Writing was one thing – a rather secondary thing – fieldwork was another – the most basic thing.

Now there was indeed a strong literary critical, text-focussed side to the critique about which anthropologists seemed to be suspicious just as they acknowledged its opening of perspective, but those of us who participated in *Writing Culture* and who primarily saw ourselves as researchers in the fieldwork paradigm always viewed this volume as having deep implications for the research process that produced the writing. *Writing Culture* is not about mere writing but the active process from fieldwork to text. Indeed any contemporary fieldwork project is deeply embedded in organizations of cultural production that are at their core writing processes. It is in this sense that the original critique of ethnography in its focus on writing had broader implication. It had much more to do with the ethnographic process and the ways that it would have to change in a world where any object of study had to be approached through a field of already existing, and even competing representations, than just the way monographs were written. This more radical implication would require transforming the traditional *mise en scène* of fieldwork, which as I noted, even the anthropologists most strongly influenced by *Writing Culture* retained in their experiments focussed on the single fieldworker/author in relation to groups of subjects.

The alternative to this well developed legacy of *Writing Culture* and the way that it has been contained by narrowly understanding it as a pursuit inspired by effete literary theory lay in breaking the bounds of the traditional fieldwork frame altogether in the effort of constituting different and more complex spaces in which the ethnographic process might occur. In defining these expanded spaces, the notion of writing, far from being some limiting focus on the writing of monographs, becomes pivotal for thinking through how ethnography might construct and enter these more complex spaces.

The key fact is that there is virtually no space or scene of fieldwork that contemporary ethnographers enter that has not been already thoroughly mediated by other projects of representation. There is no longer any question of fieldworkers entering these spaces as if these other layers and competing sectors of representation did not exist. The freshness of ethnographic perspective thus depends not on the recreation of an unmediated site of discovery of an “other” (good literary journalists are already likely to have been there). Rather, any direct, experiential sense of others as subjects – remaining a distinctive contribution of anthropology – must be accompanied by negotiating through dense webs of already existing representations. Ethnography thus becomes a kind of “writing machine” among

others, and ultimately the literal events, actions, and behaviors that are habitually the descriptive foci of study of ethnography must be negotiated as also already having been heavily represented, inscribed, and written about.

Ethnographers employ a rather primitive and even naïve organization or economy of writing in their work, and for them, there is perhaps something intimidating in being overwhelmed by other structures of power and organization, understood as writing machines, with much more complex productions of representation (as in, for example, the production of legal opinions, corporate reports, news copy, or journalistic pieces with their elaborate divisions of labour for research, fact-checking and editorial control). The image is of the lone anthropologist with his notebook, tape recorder, and word processor, working amidst the massive corporate structures of law, media, science, and contemporary political movements. "Writing Culture" today means overcoming the naïve model of writing in anthropology as ethnographers find themselves involved in other kinds of writing machines, not as a separate function of intellectual work – separate from the fieldwork – but as an integral, inseparable part of it. This overlapping of highly structured projects of representation – writing machines – in which the ethnographic process becomes engulfed is finally what it means to include institutional and everyday life worlds as parallel, complexly connected objects of study in the same frame of ethnographic inquiry. The idea of a writing machine is not just one interesting way to think about this more complex object of ethnography, but is a defining feature of fieldwork reflexive enough *not* to sustain the primitive writing machine of traditional anthropology in splendid isolation.

The writing function of ethnography is thus what ultimately ties anthropologists reflexively to their contexts of study, in which they increasingly find themselves and their writing in uncertain environments of response, reaction, reception, and competition as they provide their classic forms of knowledge amid other modes of representation. "Writing Culture" thus becomes a much broader exercise that signifies not just the production of texts in a certain controlled genre, but a metaphor for the distinctive research process of fieldwork itself in this brave new world of changed locations of research.

Postscript

Just as I was writing this article, I received a fortuitous visit in my office from Abdel Hernandez, a well known Cuban artist now working in Venezuela,

who related to me how important *Writing Culture* had been in galvanizing *avant-garde* art in Cuba during the 1980s and since. He described how popular culture had been subject to political censorship, but the universities had remained relatively open in Cuba. During the 1980s, the universities were turning out hundreds of students trained in the social sciences and the arts with very little opportunity in the society. The artists who came out of the university were committed to a social content and commitment in their practices, but no longer found inspiration in the marxist or socialist tradition of social theory and writing. *Writing Culture*, with its evocations of the dialogic, the polyphonous, and visual collage in the ethnographic genre, provided an attractive resource or vehicle around which to develop texts, works of art, and communications with the Cuban people about the conditions of their society. Hernandez showed me several of the catalogs and writings of his group, and he was in the United States to promote a group show *On Trance*, including a number of contemporary Latin American artists whose work evidences a critical ethnographic sensibility in the spirit of *Writing Culture*.

I was quite excited on a number of counts by this unsuspected example of the migration of *Writing Culture*, outside the frame of United States (or european) academia to which most of the thinking about its reception had been limited. One important historical precedent created for *Writing Culture* was that of the resonant intersection between French anthropology and the *avant-garde* art in the 1920s and 1930s which Jim Clifford evoked in his influential essay, *On Ethnographic Surrealism*. This sense of connection to a movement, not solely located inside academia, was important for the ethos of the critique that *Writing Culture* entailed. It was therefore quite exciting to know that such an intersection was in fact occurring again in other places with other predicaments than those of United States/ western European academia. Incidentally, I was told that *Writing Culture* had also been influential for at least one prominent Polish documentary filmmaker, but this did not surprise me since in the interdisciplinary arena in which *Writing Culture* circulated, it seemed to have had its greatest impact on scholars in film and media studies, workers in museums, and on art critics and art historians – an impact as great, or even greater, than in anthropology itself.

And indeed some of the most interesting ideas and strategies suggested in *Writing Culture* for producing ethnography are probably very difficult to accomplish within the scholarly constraints of academic disciplines, as the rich but narrow experimental literature on subjectivity, ethics, and identity in the anthropological encounter with the other has demonstrated. The attempt to do some of these things through art, and in places

where this attempt is a sometimes desperate response to crisis in the state and society comes to the rescue of an initiative which despite its language and intention of engagement is ultimately caught in the distanced posture of comfortable academic communities. The idea, now, that there may be more generative discussions and collaborations to have through the revealed and unsuspected disseminations of *Writing Culture* give the original vision, energy, and unfulfilled agendas of that effort the possibility of new life at its point of origin.

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"THAT DAMN BOOK": DEZ ANOS DEPOIS
DE WRITING CULTURE

Neste artigo é abordada a herança de Writing Culture, dez anos depois da sua publicação. São passados em revista os vários tipos de resposta dos antropólogos àquela obra e analisadas as oportunidades que ela proporcionou a um novo trabalho crítico em antropologia cultural e social, sobretudo nos Estados Unidos. São também sugeridas linhas de exploração dessas reflexões que não foram seguidas. A resposta mais produtiva a Writing Culture é aquela que não viu as suas preocupações como meramente textuais, como uma "viragem literária" apenas, mas que reconheceu as suas implicações para a prática de investigação em antropologia no contexto do trabalho de campo. A mais relevante herança da crítica da retórica e da representação antropológicas de meados dos anos 80 são os actuais debates sobre a prática de trabalho de campo face a novas condições e novos objectos de estudo etnográfico.

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