For a Postmodernist Writing in Anthropology
The Interpretation of Cultures

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Abstract

: James Clifford's Partial Truths is an introduction to an anthropological collection of essays, perceived as illustrative of a historical and theoretical movement, of a conceptual shift, consisting in a sharp separation of form from content to its utmost degree, the fetishizing of form. (Carstea 2021: 52) Ethnography, a hybrid activity, thus appears mainly as writing, as collecting. Viewed most broadly, perhaps, it is a mode of travel, a way of understanding and getting around in a diverse world that, since the sixteenth century, has been cartographically unified. I will argue, in concurrence with the postmodernist tenets of anthropology, put forth by James Clifford, that ethnographic knowledge could not be the property of a single discourse or discipline: the condition of off-centredness in a world of distinct meaning systems, a state of being in culture while looking at a culture, permeates postmodernist writing. Thus, to an important degree, the truth recorded is a truth provoked by ethnography, as Clifford acknowledges. The fictional, fashioned self is invariably associated with its culture and its language, namely its coded modes of expression. The subjectiveness he finds is "not an epiphany of identity freely chosen, but a cultural artefact," (Greenblatt 2008: 257) because the self manoeuvres within possibilities and constraints offered by an institutionalised assortment of collective codes and practices. I will conclude that ethnographic truths cannot be other than inherently partial and incomplete, a fact which justifies and substantiates the experimental, artisanal quality tied to the work of writing, of cultural accounts. Textualization engenders meaning by way of a circuitous movement which insulates and subsequently adds context to an event or fact in its engulfing reality. Ethnography is the interpretation of cultures.

Keywords: *Discourse; Truth; Textualization; Modes of Expression; Practices; James Clifford; Ethnography*

Introduction

James Clifford's *Partial Truths* (2003) is an introduction to an anthropological collection of essays, perceived as illustrative of a historical and theoretical movement, of a conceptual shift, consisting in a sharp separation of form from content to its utmost degree, the fetishising of form:

> We begin not with participant-observation or with cultural texts (suitable for interpretation), but with writing, the making of texts. No longer a marginal, or occulted, dimension, writing has emerged as central to what anthropologists do both in the field and thereafter. (2)

Ethnography, a hybrid activity, thus appears mainly as writing, as collecting. Viewed most broadly, perhaps, it is a mode of travel, a way of understanding and getting around in a diverse world that, since the sixteenth century, has been cartographically unified.

Ethnography's tradition is that of Herodotus and of Montesquieu's Persian. It looks obliquely at all collective arrangements, distant or nearby. It makes the familiar strange, the exotic quotidian. Ethnography cultivates an "engaged clarity", Clifford professes, like that urged by Virginia Woolf: "Let us never cease from thinking – what is this 'civilization' in which we find ourselves? What are these ceremonies and why should we take part in them? What are these professions and why should we make money out of them? Where in short is it leading us, the procession of the sons of educated men?" (*Three Guineas* 1938: 27)

One of the principal functions of cartography is "orientation" (a term left over time when Europe travelled and invented itself with respect to a fantastically unified "East"). But in the twentieth century ethnography reflects new "spatial practices," (de Certeau 1996: vii) new forms of dwelling and circulating.

Classic ethnography, Clifford recapitulates, used writing as a method in investigating the aforementioned spatial practices. It demanded transparency of representation, sheer factuality and objectivity. So, again, writing reduced to method: keeping good field notes, making accurate maps, writing up results.

Against the grain of classicism, the essays in the anthology – Clifford strongly maintains – struggle with these received definitions, in an attempt at investigating the limits of representation itself. In fact, they want to wipe the slate clean and do away altogether with representation:

> They assume that academic and literary genres interpenetrate and that the writing of cultural descriptions is properly experimental and ethical. Their focus on text making and rhetoric serves to highlight the constructed, artificial nature of cultural accounts. It undermines overly transparent modes of authority, and it draws attention to the historical predicament of ethnography: the fact that it is always caught up in the invention, not the representation of cultures. (Clifford 2003: 2)

Ethnographic knowledge could not be the property of a single discourse or discipline: the state of off-centredness in a world of definite semantic paradigms, a condition of being in culture while looking at a culture, permeates twentieth-century writing. Nietzsche had explicitly proclaimed this viewpoint, raising the question:

> What, then is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms and anthropomorphisms – in short, a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical and obligatory to a people. (*On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*, 1873: 4)

Thus, to an important degree, the truth recorded is a truth *provoked* by ethnography – as Clifford acknowledges.

No question, then, of an ethnographic *vérité* – professed by an anthropologist stigmatised by Clifford, namely Robert Griaule – correlative with the cinema vérité spearheaded by one of Griaule's associates, Jean Rouch. In other words, not a reality impartially documented by the camera, but fiction, since it is occasioned by the presence of the camera:

> To call ethnographies fictions may raise empiricist hackles. But the word as commonly used in recent textual theory has lost its connotation of falsehood, of something merely opposed to truth. It suggests the *partiality* of cultural and historical truths, the ways they are systematic and exclusive. Ethnographic writings can properly be called fictions in the sense of "something made or fashioned", the principal burden of the word's Latin root, *fingere*. But it is important to preserve the meaning not merely of making, but also of *making up* (my emphasis), of inventing things not actually real. Interpretive social scientists have recently come to view good ethnographies as "true fictions", but usually at the cost of weakening the oxymoron, reducing it to the banal claim that all truths are constructed. (Clifford 2003: 6)

I shall stop for a moment and concentrate, in a part for whole way, without undue distortion, on Stephen Greenblatt's conceiving of (self)-fashioning, because the discussion of confectedness (to borrow a Nietzschean term) at a smaller scale, the individual one, will yield helpful comparisons with the ethnographical method proposed by Clifford. For Greenblatt, figures like Marlowe, Shakespeare, exemplify "an increased self-consciousness about the fashioning of human identity as a manipulable, artful process." (Greenblatt 2008:2) He is adamantly committed to the possibility of fashioning one's identity, although this might imply commitment to "selfhood conceived as a fiction".

The fictional, fashioned self is invariably associated with its *culture* and its *language*, namely its coded modes of expression. The subjectiveness he finds is "not an epiphany of identity freely chosen but a cultural artefact," (Greenblatt 2008: 257) for the self manoeuvres within possibilities and constraints offered by an institutionalised assortment of collective codes and practices. To all appearances, Greenblatt's warning echoes Foucault: "The power to impose a shape upon oneself is an aspect of the more general power to control identity – that of the others at least as much as one's own." (Greenblatt 2008: 1)

We can safely infer that all ethnographic discourse, including Greenblatt's literary variant, behaves in a twofold way. Although portraying selfhood as constituted within culture, it likewise shapes an identity authorised to interpret, to represent, even to give credit to – albeit slightly ironically – the truth of divergent worlds.

In this light, ethnographic truths cannot be other than inherently partial and incomplete, a fact which justifies and substantiates the experimental, artisanal quality tied to the work of writing, of cultural accounts. The post-structuralist ethnographer writes with the conviction at the back of his mind, that "all discourse is irredeemably figurative and polysemous" and that the expressive tropes that "select and impose (sic!) meaning as they translate it 'cannot be avoided.'" (Clifford 2003: 7)

Clifford will discuss at length the "inescapability" of tropes, to which meaning itself is relegated – as he intimates – in another theoretical text, *On Ethnographic Allegory*.

Allegory (from the Greek *allos*, "other", and *agoreuein*, "to speak") customarily references a practice wherein a narrative fiction uninterruptedly hints at some other sequence of events or ideas. It is a representation which "interprets" (Clifford 2003: 98) itself, with its author conceding that "[e]thnographic

writing is allegorical at the level both of its content (what it says about cultures and their histories) and of its form (what is implied by its mode of textualization)".

In this statement, two words arrest our attention: interpretation and textualization. Interpretation, based on a philological model of textual reading, contributes to a growing discernibility of the creative processes yielding the generation of cultural objects and their treatment as meaningful.

Textualization, according to Clifford Geertz's devised theory, is conceived of as a precondition for interpretation. It is "the process through which unwritten behaviour, speech, beliefs, oral tradition and ritual come to be marked as a corpus, a potentially meaningful ensemble separated out from an immediate discursive or performative situation." (Geertz 2007: 58) At the moment of textualization, this meaningful corpus takes on a relatively balanced relation to a context.

The outcome of this process is familiar to us in much of what counts as ethnographic "thick description". By way of illustration, certain institutions or fragments of behaviour are considered emblematic of, or expressive elements within, a surrounding culture, as when Geertz's famed rooster fight (chapter 15) becomes a deeply consequential site of Balinese culture. Aggregations of synecdoches are generated, where segments are correlated to wholes, and at the end of this process culture – a whole of sorts – is constituted.

So, an unavoidable relation is posed between text and world. The latter cannot be captured unmediatedly, it is by and large inferred based on its divisions, and these divisions need to be perceptually and conceptually cropped out of the flow of experience:

> A recognition of allegory emphasizes that fact that realistic portraits, to the extent that they are "convincing" or "rich", are extended metaphors, patterns of associations that point to coherent (theoretical, aesthetic, moral) additional meanings. Allegory (more strongly than "interpretation") calls to mind the poetic, traditional, cosmological nature of such writing processes. Allegory draws special attention to the *narrative* character of cultural representations, to the stories built into the representational process itself. It also breaks down the seamless quality of cultural description by adding a temporal aspect to the process of reading. (Clifford 2003: 105)

Thus, textualization generates sense through a circular movement that isolates and then contextualises an event or fact in the world that encloses it. This generates an insightful mode of authority that purports to be representative of meaningful, discrete realities. It follows that ethnography is, in actuality, the *interpretation* of cultures.

At this point, a necessary conclusion would be that tropes take upon themselves the production of meaning itself; which, as a consequence, posits and concomitantly hinges on the deconstructive ideal of the self-reflexivity and the autonomy of the text. The idea of the autonomy of the text, as well as its self-reflexivity, with its quite limitless mise-en-abyme, goes hand in hand with the assumption of the text's self-referentiality as constitutive of this self-same autonomy.

In general, it is deconstructive criticism which pins the self-reflexivity of the text on tropes, images, similes. While not disputing the status or, for that matter, the nature of *representation* in the text, the poststructuralist, deconstructive school of thought considers that these symbols of the whole re-inscribe, by and large, the act of writing itself. (Gasché 2005: 46-7) The text itself is said to perceive through such images, "the act of constituting – that is, of writing – its nascent *logos*." (ibid. 47)

Consequently, the text's self-reflexivity hinges on the totalising consciousness of its author. Here is what Clifford says:

A subgenre of ethnographic writing emerged, the self-reflexive 'fieldwork account'. Variously sophisticated and naïve, confessional and analytic, these accounts provide an important forum for the discussion of a wide range of issues, epistemological, existential and political. The discourse of the cultural analyst can no longer be simply that of the "experienced" observer describing and interpreting custom. […] With the "fieldwork account", the rhetoric of experienced objectivity yields to that of the autobiography and ironic self-portrait. (Clifford 2003: 14)

In *The Rhetoric of Blindness: Jacques Derrida's Reading of Rousseau* (2007), de Man places the emphasis, nevertheless, on the text's self-reflexivity. In analysing Rousseau's text (*Confessions*, 1781) he says that, given its "literariness", "the text has no blind spots: it accounts at all moments for its own theoretical mode". (3)

Literariness is also what Clifford deems as a must in the proclaimed "new" ethnographic writing:

> […] though ethnographers have often been called novelists manqués, the notion that literary procedures pervade any work of cultural representation is a recent idea in the discipline. To a growing number, however, the "literariness" of anthropology – and especially of ethnography – appears as *much more than a matter of good writing or distinctive style* (emphasis added). Literary processes – metaphor, figuration, narrative – affect the ways cultural phenomena are registered, from the first jotted "observations", to the completed book, to the ways these configurations "make senses" in the determined acts of reading. (Clifford 2003: 4)

And, once again, de Man attributes a self-awareness and a self-control to literary language itself. Poststructuralist deconstruction would consequently be grounded in the self-consciousness of the text. Self-consciousness, however, is only the modern mode of presence being understood as subjectivity. Indeed, de Man attributes a series of cognitive functions to the text:

> The text…accounts for its own mode of writing, it states at the same time the necessity of making this statement itself in an indirect, figural way that knows it will be misunderstood by being taken literally. Accounting for the 'rhetoricity' of its own mode, the text also postulates the necessity of its own misreading. It knows and asserts that it will be misunderstood. (idem)

Laden with rhetoricity, the text cannot but put forth an indeterminate, ambiguous, "playful" meaning. The unavoidable uncertainty is parabolically acknowledged by Clifford:

> Ethnographers are more and more like the Cree hunter, who (the story goes) came to Montreal to testify in court concerning the fate of his hunting lands in the new James Bay Hydroelectrics camp. He would describe his way of life. But when administered the oath, he hesitated: 'I'm not sure I can tell the truth. I can only tell what I know.' (Clifford 2003: 8)

So, literariness, textuality and writing are to be thought in terms of self-consciousness. It is this sort of writing, theorised by Derrida and intimated by Clifford, that makes the writer recede in the arrière-plan. Yet, in *Action and Identity in Nietzsche* (1995), de Man allowed for a speculation about the whole of the text that is not identical to its (reflexive) totality, when he wrote:

> Moreover, the reversal from denial to assertion implicit in the deconstructive discourse never reaches the symmetrical counterpart of what it denies…The negative thrust of the deconstruction remains unimpaired; after Nietzsche (and indeed, after any "text") we can no longer hope ever to "know" in peace. (18)

So, paradoxically, it is de Man's investigation into tropology that undermines the possibility of knowledge by putting into question the "metaphysical" integrity of the text. He seems to show, then, an

impossibility of controlling tropes, an impossibility due to an "asymmetry of the binary model that opposes the figural to the proper meaning of the figure," which implies an inextricable entanglement of the self-reflecting subject with a narrative. (de Man 1995: 18)

This latter amendment of Paul de Man prompts us to consider such rhetorical manoeuvres as an instantiation of what Gianni Vattimo (1993) called 'weak thinking', 'pensiero debole', which forbids us to name things by their names and requires of us to rename them, ever and ever again. It rejects the strong categories of structuralist discourse, such as truth, good, justice, endlessly investigating their substance in relation to the hic and nunc.

We could say, tangentially, that rhetorical manoeuvres are not always honestly employed, but are practised as a kind of dialect by different "cultures": the political-class culture, the football culture (and other such reifications of culture-as-commodity).

Rhetorical manoeuvres are no more than escapism in tropes (*trepein* = to deviate from). Under the pretence of having recourse to illuminating detours, they obscure meaning and put forward a philistine meaninglessness. One can argue whether a vision can or cannot be uttered in non-tropological language.

In any event, when plainness is dodged rhetorically, a prosthesis of sorts is attached to vision, so as to extend it. But this very prosthesis exposes the artificiality, the hollowness of the construction. It follows that rhetorical manoeuvres inherently dodge the clear-cut accuracy of truth or other such strong categories and undergo a slippage into relativism. It is a sort of self-indictment, it is the kind of linguistic practice that falls on its sword. (Carstea 2006: 110-11)

Yet, there is no escaping the escapism in tropes, not in the newly conceived and theorised "writing as invention", as opposed to the classical "writing as method". Clifford:

> There is no way definitely, surgically to separate the factual from the allegorical in cultural accounts. The data of ethnography make sense only within pattern arrangements and narratives, and these are conventional, political and meaningful in a more than referential sense. Cultural facts are not true and cultural allegories false. In the human sciences, the relation of fact to allegory is a domain of struggle and institutional discipline. The meanings of am ethnographic account are uncontrollable. (Clifford 2003: 119-20)

At this point, we could launch a challenge for an answer to the poststructuralist anthropological text: does its writer recede in the background, does s/he allow the presence of the other, is s/he, at the end of the day, hospitable in the Derridean sense?

Well, a discussion on the self-reflexivity of the text, on its autonomy from its writer will provide us with the appropriate context, enabling us to take the challenge and attempt to answer.

It may come in the form of the dialogism professed by Clifford:

> Many voices clamour for expression. Polivocality was restrained and orchestrated in traditional ethnographies by giving to one voice a pervasive auctorial function and to others the role of sources, "informants", to be quoted or paraphrased. Once dialogism and polyphony are recognized as modes of textual production, monophonic authority is questioned, revealed to be characteristic of a science that has claimed to *represent* cultures. The tendency to specify discourses – historically and intersubjectively – recasts this authority, and in the process alters the questions we put to cultural descriptions. (Clifford 2003: 8)

A useful standpoint is provided by Bakhtin's analysis of the "polyphonic" novel. The fact that it should represent speaking subjects across multiple discourses is, he argues, an essential condition of the

genre. To put it differently, the novel stages heteroglossia. For Bakhtin, there are no integrated cultural worlds of languages. His preoccupation with the representation of non-homogeneous wholes prompts him to consider that any attempt to posit such abstract unities would equate with the construction of monological power.

A "culture" is, in concrete terms, a creative, open-ended, dialogue of insiders and outsiders, of subcultures, of different groups. A "language" is the struggle of generic commonplaces and the interplay of professional jargons, regional dialects, the speech of diverse individuals and age groups.

For Bakhtin, the polyglossic novel is not a masterpiece of historical or cultural totalisation, but rather a carnivalesque area of multiplicity. He exposes an imaginary textual space, wherein the dialogic interplay of voices, discursive complexity, can be harboured. Bakhtin's ideal novelist is a "polyphonist" and this is the reason why, in the novels of Dickens, he appreciates exactly their defiance of totality. "But Dickens must be set against Flaubert, the master of authorial control, moving godlike among the thoughts and feelings of his characters." (Bakhtin 1994: 15)

Ethnography, like the novel, wrestles with these alternatives. (Rabinow 2003: 246) Is the depiction of what natives think, made in a similar fashion to Flaubert's "free indirect style", which quells unmediated connotation, giving way, instead, to a controlling discourse, one which is practically that of the author? Or does the portrayal of the subjectivities stand in need of a variety less homogeneous stylistically, but replete with Dickens's "different voices" instead?

Unless ethnography or the novel, for that matter is a patchwork of citations, some use of indirect style is inevitable. For, though "the subjectivity of the author is separated from the objective referent of the text. At best, the author's personal voice is seen as a style in the weak sense: a tone, or embellishment of the facts," (Clifford 2003: 13) and though "informants begin to be considered as co-authors and the ethnographer as scribe and archivist, as well as interpreting observer," nevertheless – the same Clifford contends – "we can ask new, critical questions of all ethnographies". Because "[h]owever monological, dialogical, or polyphonic their form, they are hierarchical arrangements of discourses." (ibidem, 17)

The notion of "hierarchy" in a context which wants to evacuate univocity and to welcome plurivocality has a strange resonance. It signals the dangers lurking behind any attempt at letting the "other" speak.

Clifford mentioned, as a matter of fact, early on in his *Introduction*, the critique levelled by Edward Said against *Orientalism*:

> For Said, the Orient is 'textualised'; its multiple, divergent stories and existential predicaments are coherently woven as a body of signs susceptible of virtuoso reading. This Orient, occulted and fragile, is brought lovingly to light, salvaged in the work of the outside scholar. The effect of domination in spatial/ temporal developments (not limited, of course, to Orientalism proper) is that they confer on the other a discrete identity, while also providing the knowing observer with a standpoint from which *to see without being seen* (emphasis added), to read without interpretation. (19)

This methodical suspicion of the reconstitutive procedures of writing about others could be usefully broadened, beyond Orientalism, to include anthropological practice in general.

While Orientalism – as described by Said (*Orientalism* 1978: 49-72) – has a structure, this recedes, in its propensity to dichotomise into we/they binary oppositions and to essentialise or even generalise about the resultant "other".

All Orientalist visions and textualizations, as Said terms them, serve to stamp out a genuine human reality. The author was often led to argue in his book that knowledge is both powerful and fictional, that cultural definitions must be restrictive, that language distorts. This equates with suggesting that authenticity, experience, reality, presence are discursive protocols, rhetorical conventions.

All in all, unlike an historian, an anthropologist drawing on fieldwork cannot – not even in theory – control all the available evidence and render it "truthfully". (Carstea 2015: 4) Any community which counts itself among potential futures cannot be a finite archive. Unlike a psychoanalyst, the anthropologist cannot allege to have had an unmediated encounter with their subject – a culture.

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