



“Writing against Culture”

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Lila Abu-Lughod

Editors' introduction



When Clifford Geertz wrote that a semiotic approach to culture challenged the assumption of a clear divide between the ethnographer and informant and therefore raised some important questions about the “objectivity” of cultural interpretation, a line of critical inquiry was launched that perhaps found its final apogee in the influential volume *Writing Culture* (1986). Edited by James Clifford and George Marcus, this book was the outcome of a seminar that sought to explore the making of ethnographic texts. *Writing Culture* considered the “politics and poetics” of ethnographies as “partial truths,” “situated knowledges,” and even “fictions.” Influenced by poststructuralist theory, the volume’s authors scrutinized the ways knowledge about culture was produced, how language itself structured such knowledge, and how scholarly interpretations should not be viewed as transparent media through which one might gain a complete understanding of other people. The authors of the volume raised such questions about the production of knowledge and the questionable objectivity of ethnographic accounts by subjecting them to a *textual* critique. If culture, in other words, was similar to language (that is, a system of signs and meanings), as Geertz had initially suggested, then it was time to challenge it with the same poststructural theories of language that were being applied throughout the humanities during the late 1970s and 1980s.

Lila Abu-Lughod begins her essay with the claim that the arguments made in *Writing Culture* need to be extended to a more radical conclusion. Rather than settle for new textual strategies in ethnography that acknowledge the “partial” and “situated” qualities of ethnographic texts, Abu-Lughod argues for strategies of writing *against* culture altogether. Culture, she argues, remains too laden with the assumptions of a divide between the knowledgeable scholar (that is, the “subject,” the “self”) and the person whose culture is under investigation (the “object,” the “other”). *Writing Culture* did not go far enough to challenge this basic divide, Abu-Lughod argues, because it did not directly address the situations of feminist scholars and what she calls *halfies* (people of mixed national or cultural identity). Had feminist perspectives been considered, for instance, a more basic challenge to the *self–other divide* upon which ethnographic inquiry is based would have been revealed. The feminist argument Abu-Lughod references here is that the “self” is created by being contrasted to some “other.” That self–other binary lies at the heart of our sense of identity and is expressed in many different ways (e.g. man/woman; straight/gay; local citizen/outside alien). But the most important part of recognizing this binary is to understand that it always entails some kind of *uneven or hierarchical* relationship. Because “culture” is the tool for creating this self–other binary in disciplines focusing on culture, such as anthropology or geography, it carries with it the baggage of hierarchy.

Anthropologists and cultural geographers have long recognized the colonial and imperialist contexts within which their forebears worked. These contexts serve as a focal point for much of the discussion in Part Two of the *Reader*. Clearly, nineteenth and early twentieth century scholars from Europe and North America who worked in Latin America, Africa, and much of Asia and Oceania carried out their work under the colonial flag and with the kind of impunity that their connections to imperial power afforded them. Yet Abu-Lughod finds that contemporary scholars have failed to really come to terms with the fact that the idea of culture as a “whole way of life” came about because European and North American scholars were able to study “others” in a colonial situation in which those scholars also held considerable *power* over those “others”. Work on culture today needs to not simply acknowledge this history, Abu-Lughod argues, but actively work *against* it by developing critical challenges to the idea of culture as we know it today.

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Abu-Lughod’s work is important in cultural geography not only because of her interrogation of the concept of culture itself, but because of her work bridging feminist theory, national identity, and popular culture. Her work on the Egyptian media, for instance, helps trace the linkages across scale between local practices of viewing television soap operas and larger practices of nation building. As with much contemporary cultural geography, culture here is viewed as “ordinary” and “situated” in a local context and place, and yet this does not mean it is not also part of the apparatus that builds larger-scale processes, such as the construction of a national identity. In addition, the feminist critique in Abu-Lughod’s work has played a significant role in shaping debates and new directions in contemporary cultural geography. Work, for example, by Gillian Rose (*Feminism and Geography*, 1993), Geraldine Pratt (*Working Feminism*, 2004), and Nicky Gregson (*Second Hand Cultures*, 2003), demonstrates many of the approaches to writing “against culture” advocated here by Abu-Lughod, including a focus on everyday practice, situating the researcher in connection with her research subjects, and focusing on “ethnographies of the particular.”

Writing Culture, the collection that marked a major new form of critique of cultural anthropology’s premises, more or less excluded *two* critical groups whose situations neatly expose and challenge the most basic of those premises: feminists and “halfies” – (people whose national or cultural identity is mixed by virtue of migration, overseas education, or parentage). In his introduction, Clifford apologizes for the feminist absence; no one mentions halfies or the indigenous anthropologists to whom they are related. Perhaps they are not yet numerous enough or sufficiently self-defined as a group. The importance of these two groups lies not in any superior moral claim or advantage they might have in doing anthropology, but in the special dilemmas they face, dilemmas that reveal starkly the problems with cultural anthropology’s assumption of a fundamental distinction between self and other.

In this essay I explore how feminists and halfies, by the way their anthropological practice

unsettles the boundary between self and other, enable us to reflect on the conventional nature and political effects of this distinction and ultimately to reconsider the value of the concept of culture on which it depends. I will argue that culture operates in anthropological discourse to enforce separations that inevitably carry a sense of hierarchy. Therefore anthropologists should now pursue, without exaggerated hopes for the power of their texts to change the world, a variety of strategies for writing *against* culture. For those interested in textual strategies, I explore the advantages of what I call “ethnographies of the particular” as instruments of a tactical humanism.

SELVES AND OTHERS

The notion of culture (especially as it functions to distinguish “cultures”), despite a long usefulness, may

now have become something anthropologists would want to work against in their theories, their ethnographic practice, and their ethnographic writing. A helpful way to begin to grasp why is to consider what the shared elements of feminist and halfie anthropology clarify about the self/other distinction central to the paradigm of anthropology. Marilyn Strathern raises some of the issues regarding feminism in essays ["Dislodging a worldview" in *Australian Feminist Studies* 1, 1985, and "An awkward relationship" in *Signs* 12, 1987] that both Clifford and Rabinow cited in *Writing Culture*. Her thesis is that the relationship between anthropology and feminism is awkward. This thesis leads her to try to understand why Feminist scholarship, in spite of its rhetoric of radicalism, has failed to fundamentally alter anthropology and why feminism has gained even less from anthropology than vice versa.

The awkwardness, she argues, arises from the fact that despite a common interest in differences, the scholarly practices of feminists and anthropologists are differently structured in the way they organize knowledge and draw boundaries, and especially in the nature of the investigators' *relationship* to their subject matter. Feminist scholars, united by their common opposition to men or to patriarchy, produce a discourse composed of many voices; they "discover the self by becoming conscious of oppression from the Other." Anthropologists, whose goal is "to make sense of differences," also constitute their "selves" in relation to an other, but do not view this other as "under attack."

In highlighting the self/other relationship, Strathern takes us to the heart of the problem. Yet she retreats from the problematic of power (granted as formative in feminism) in her strangely uncritical depiction of anthropology. When she defines anthropology as "a discipline that continues to know itself as the study of social behavior or society in terms of systems and collective representations," she underplays the self/other distinction. In characterizing the relationship between anthropological self and other as nonadversarial, she ignores its most fundamental aspect. Anthropology's avowed goal may be "the study of man [*sic*]," but it is a discipline built on the historically constructed divide between the West and the non-West. It has been and continues to be primarily the study of the non-Western other by the Western self, even if in its new guise it seeks explicitly to give

voice to the Other or to present a dialogue between the self and other, either textually or through an explication of the fieldwork encounter. And the relationship between the West and the non-West, at least since the birth of anthropology, has been constituted by Western domination. This suggests that the awkwardness Strathern senses in the relationship between feminism and anthropology might better be understood as the result of diametrically opposed processes of self-construction through opposition to others – processes that begin from different sides of a power divide.

[...]

If anthropology continues to be practiced as the study by an unproblematic and unmarked Western self of found "others" out there, feminist theory, an academic practice that also traffics in selves and others, has in its relatively short history come to realize the danger of treating selves and others as givens. It is instructive for the development of a critique of anthropology to consider the trajectory that has led, within two decades, to what some might call a crisis in feminist theory, and others, the development of postfeminism.

From Simone de Beauvoir on, it has been accepted that, at least in the modern West, women have been the other to men's self. Feminism has been a movement devoted to helping women become selves and subjects rather than objects and men's others. The crisis in feminist theory (related to a crisis in the women's movement) that followed on the heels of feminist attempts to turn those who had been constituted as other into selves – or, to use the popular metaphor, to let women speak – was the problem of "difference." For whom did feminists speak? Within the women's movement, the objections of lesbians, African-American women, and other "women of color" that their experiences as women were different from those of white, middle-class, heterosexual women problematized the identity of women as selves. Cross-cultural work on women also made it clear that masculine and feminine did not have, as we say, the same meanings in other cultures, nor did Third World women's lives resemble Western women's lives. As Harding puts it, the problem is that "once 'woman' is deconstructed into 'women' and 'gender' is recognized to have no fixed referents, feminism itself dissolves as a theory that can reflect the voice of a naturalized or essentialized speaker."

From its experience with this crisis of selfhood or subjecthood, feminist theory can offer anthropology two useful reminders. First, the self is always a construction, never a natural or found entity, even if it has that appearance. Second, the process of creating a self through opposition to an other always entails the violence of repressing or ignoring other forms of difference. Feminist theorists have been forced to explore the implications for the formation of identity and the possibilities for political action of the ways in which gender as a system of difference is intersected by other systems of difference, including, in the modern capitalist world, race and class.

Where does this leave the feminist anthropologist? Strathern characterizes her as experiencing a tension – “caught between structures faced with two different ways of relating to her or his subject matter.” The more interesting aspect of the feminist’s situation, though, is what she shares with the halfie: a blocked ability to comfortably assume the self of anthropology. For both, although in different ways, the self is split, caught at the intersection of systems of difference. I am less concerned with the existential consequences of this split . . . than with the awareness such splits generate about three crucial issues: positionality, audience, and the power inherent in distinctions of self and other. What happens when the “other” that the anthropologist is studying is simultaneously constructed as, at least partially, a self?

Feminists and halfie anthropologists cannot easily avoid the issue of positionality. Standing on shifting ground makes it clear that every view is a view from somewhere and every act of speaking a speaking from somewhere. Cultural anthropologists have never been fully convinced of the ideology of science and have long questioned the value, possibility, and definition of objectivity. But they still seem reluctant to examine the implications of the actual situatedness of their knowledge.

Two common, intertwined objections to the work of feminist or native or semi-native anthropologists, both related to partiality, betray the persistence of ideals of objectivity. The first has to do with the partiality (as bias or position) of the observer. The second has to do with the partial (incomplete) nature of the picture presented. Halfies are more associated with the first problem, feminists the second. The problem with studying

one’s own society is alleged to be the problem of gaining enough distance. Since, for halfies, the Other is in certain ways the self, there is said to be the danger shared with indigenous anthropologists of identification and the easy slide into subjectivity. These worries suggest that the anthropologist is still defined as a being who must stand apart from the Other, even when he or she seeks explicitly to bridge the gap. Even Bourdieu, who perceptively analyzed the effects this outsider stance has on the anthropologist’s (mis)understanding of social life, fails to break with this doxa. The obvious point he misses is that the outsider self never simply stands outside. He or she stands in a definite relation with the Other of the study, not just as a Westerner, but as a Frenchman in Algeria during the war of independence, an American in Morocco during the 1967 Arab–Israeli war, or an Englishwoman in postcolonial India. What we call the outside is a position within a larger political-historical complex. No less than the halfie, the “wholie” is in a specific position vis-à-vis the community being studied.

The debates about feminist anthropologists suggest a second source of uneasiness about positionality. Even when they present themselves as studying gender, feminist anthropologists are dismissed as presenting only a partial picture of the societies they study because they are assumed to be studying only women. Anthropologists study society, the unmarked form. The study of women is the marked form, too readily sectioned off, as Strathern notes. Yet it could easily be argued that most studies of society have been equally partial. As restudies like Weiner’s of Malinowski’s Trobriand Islanders or Bell’s of the well-studied Australian aborigines indicate, they have been the study of men. This does not make such studies any less valuable; it merely reminds us that we must constantly attend to the positionality of the anthropological self and its representations of others. James Clifford, among others, has convincingly argued that ethnographic representations are always “partial truths.” What is needed is a recognition that they are also positioned truths.

Split selfhood creates for the two groups being discussed a second problem that is illuminating for anthropology generally: multiple audiences. Although all anthropologists are beginning to feel what might be called the Rushdie effect – the effects of living in a global age when the subjects of their

studies begin to read their works and the governments of the countries they work in ban books and deny visas – feminist and halfie anthropologists struggle in poignant ways with multiple accountability. Rather than having one primary audience, that of other anthropologists, feminist anthropologists write for anthropologists and for feminists, two groups whose relationship to their subject matter is at odds and who hold ethnographers accountable in different ways. Furthermore, feminist circles include non-Western feminists, often from the societies feminist anthropologists have studied, who call them to account in new ways.

Halfies' dilemmas are even more extreme. As anthropologists, they write for other anthropologists, mostly Western. Identified also with communities outside the West, or subcultures within it, they are called to account by educated members of those communities. More importantly, not just because they position themselves with reference to two communities but because when they present the Other they are presenting themselves, they speak with a complex awareness of and investment in reception. Both halfie and feminist anthropologists are forced to confront squarely the politics and ethics of their representations. There are no easy solutions to their dilemmas.

The third issue that feminist and halfie anthropologists, unlike anthropologists who work in Western societies (another group for whom self and other are somewhat tangled), force us to confront is the dubiousness of maintaining that relationships between self and other are innocent of power. Because of sexism and racial or ethnic discrimination, they may have experienced – as women, as individuals of mixed parentage, or as foreigners – being other to a dominant self, whether in everyday life in the U.S., Britain, or France, or in the Western academy. This is not simply an experience of difference, but of inequality. My argument, however, is structural, not experiential. Women, blacks, and people of most of the non-West have been historically constituted as others in the major political systems of difference on which the unequal world of modern capitalism has depended. Feminist studies and black studies have made sufficient progress within the academy to have exposed the way that being studied by “white men” (to use a shorthand for a complex and historically constituted subject-position) turns into being spoken for by

them. It becomes a sign and instrument of their power.

Within anthropology, despite a long history of self-conscious opposition to racism, a fast-growing, self-critical literature on anthropology's links to colonialism, and experimentation with techniques of ethnography to relieve a discomfort with the power of anthropologist over anthropological subject, the fundamental issues of domination keep being skirted. Even attempts to refigure informants as consultants and to “let the other speak” in dialogic or polyvocal texts – decolonizations on the level of the text – leave intact the basic configuration of global power on which anthropology, as linked to other institutions of the world, is based. To see the strangeness of this enterprise, all that is needed is to consider an analogous case. What would our reaction be if male scholars stated their desire to “let women speak” in their texts while they continued to dominate all knowledge about them by controlling writing and other academic practices, supported in their positions by a particular organization of economic, social, and political life?

Because of their split selves, feminist and halfie anthropologists travel uneasily between speaking “for” and speaking “from.” Their situation enables us to see more clearly that dividing practices, whether they naturalize differences, as in gender or race, or simply elaborate them, as I will argue the concept of culture does, are fundamental methods of enforcing inequality.

CULTURE AND DIFFERENCE

The concept of culture is the hidden term in all that has just been said about anthropology. Most American anthropologists believe or act as if “culture,” notoriously resistant to definition and ambiguous of referent, is nevertheless the true object of anthropological inquiry. Yet it could also be argued that culture is important to anthropology because the anthropological distinction between self and other rests on it. Culture is the essential tool for making other. As a professional discourse that elaborates on the meaning of culture in order to account for, explain, and understand cultural difference, anthropology also helps construct, produce, and maintain it. Anthropological discourse

gives cultural difference (and the separation between groups of people it implies) the air of the self-evident.

In this regard, the concept of culture operates much like its predecessor – race – even though in its twentieth-century form it has some important political advantages. Unlike race, and unlike even the nineteenth-century sense of culture as a synonym for civilization (contrasted to barbarism), the current concept allows for multiple rather than binary differences. This immediately checks the easy move to hierarchizing, the shift to “culture” . . . has a relativizing effect. The most important of culture’s advantages, however, is that it removes difference from the realm of the natural and the innate. Whether conceived of as a set of behaviors, customs, traditions, rules, plans, recipes, instructions, or programs . . . culture is learned and can change.

Despite its anti-essentialist intent, however, the culture concept retains some of the tendencies to freeze difference possessed by concepts like race. This is easier to see if we consider a field in which there has been a shift from one to the other. Orientalism as a scholarly discourse (among other things) is, according to Said, “a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between the Orient and (most of the time) ‘the Occident’.” What he shows is that in mapping geography, race, and culture on to one another, Orientalism fixes differences between people of “the West” and people of “the East” in ways so rigid that they might as well be considered innate. In the twentieth century, cultural difference, not race, has been the basic subject of Orientalist scholarship devoted now to interpreting the “culture” phenomena (primarily religion and language) to which basic differences in development, economic performance, government, character, and so forth are attributed.

Some anticolonial movements and present-day struggles have worked by what could be labelled reverse Orientalism, where attempts to reverse the power relationship proceed by seeking to valorize for the self what in the former system had been devalued as other. A Gandhian appeal to the greater spirituality of a Hindu India, compared with the materialism and violence of the West, and an Islamicist appeal to a greater faith in God, compared with the immorality and corruption of the West, both accept the essentialist terms of Orientalist

constructions. While turning them on their heads, they preserve the rigid sense of difference based on culture.

A parallel can be drawn with feminism. It is a basic tenet of feminism that “women are made, not born.” It has been important for most feminists to locate sex differences in culture, not biology or nature. While this has inspired some feminist theorists to attend to the social and personal effects of gender as a system of difference, for many others it has led to explorations of and strategies built on the notion of a women’s culture. Cultural feminism takes many forms, but it has many of the qualities of reverse Orientalism just discussed. For French feminists like Irigaray, Cixous, and Kristeva, masculine and feminine, if not actually male and female, represent essentially different modes of being. Anglo-American feminists take a different tack. Some attempt to “describe” the cultural differences between men and women . . . Others try to “explain” the differences . . . Much feminist theorizing and practice seeks to build or reform social life in line with this “women’s culture.” There have been proposals for a woman-centered university, a feminist science, a feminist methodology in the sciences and social sciences, and even a feminist spirituality and ecology. These proposals nearly always build on values traditionally associated in the West with women – a sense of care and connectedness, maternal nurturing, immediacy of experience, involvement in the bodily (versus the abstract), and so forth.

This valorization by cultural feminists, like reverse Orientalists, of the previously devalued qualities attributed to them may be provisionally useful in forging a sense of unity and in waging struggles of empowerment. Yet because it leaves in place the divide that structured the experiences of selfhood and oppression on which it builds, it perpetuates some dangerous tendencies. First, cultural feminists overlook the connections between those on each side of the divide, and the ways in which they define each other. Second, they overlook differences within each category constructed by the dividing practices, differences like those of class, race, and sexuality (to repeat the feminist litany of problematically abstract categories), but also ethnic origin, personal experience, age, mode of livelihood, health, living situation (rural or urban), and historical experience. Third, and perhaps most important, they

ignore the ways in which experiences have been constructed historically and have changed over time. Both cultural feminism and revivalist movements tend to rely on notions of authenticity and the return to positive values not represented by the dominant other. As becomes obvious in the most extreme cases, these moves erase history. Invocations of Cretan goddesses in some cultural-feminist circles and, in a more complex and serious way, the powerful invocation of the seventh-century community of the Prophet in some Islamic movements are good examples.

The point is that the notion of culture which both types of movements use does not seem to guarantee an escape from the tendency toward essentialism. It could be argued that anthropologists use "culture" in more sophisticated and consistent ways and that their commitment to it as an analytical tool is firmer. Yet even many of them are now concerned about the ways it tends to freeze differences. Appadurai, for example, in his compelling argument that "natives" are a figment of the anthropological imagination, shows the complicity of the anthropological concept of culture in a continuing "incarceration" of non-Western peoples in time and place. Denied the same capacity for movement, travel, and geographical interaction that Westerners take for granted, the cultures studied by anthropologists have tended to be denied history as well.

Others, including myself, have argued that cultural theories also tend to overemphasize coherence. Clifford notes both that the discipline of fieldwork-based anthropology, in constituting its authority, constructs and reconstructs coherent cultural others and interpreting "selves" and that ethnography is a form of culture collecting (like art collecting) in which "diverse experiences and facts are selected, gathered, detached from their original temporal occasions, and given enduring value in a new arrangement." Organic metaphors of wholeness and the methodology of holism that characterizes anthropology both favor coherence, which in turn contributes to the perception of communities as bounded and discrete.

Certainly discreteness does not have to imply value; the hallmark of twentieth-century anthropology has been its promotion of cultural relativism over evaluation and judgment. If anthropology has always to some extent been a form of cultural (self-) critique, that too was an aspect of a refusal

to hierarchize difference. Yet neither position would be possible without difference. It would be worth thinking about the implications of the high stakes anthropology has in sustaining and perpetuating a belief in the existence of cultures that are identifiable as discrete, different, and separate from our own. Does difference always smuggle in hierarchy?

In *Orientalism*, Said argues for the elimination of "the Orient" and "the Occident" altogether. By this he means not the erasure of all differences but the recognition of more of them and of the complex ways in which they crosscut. More important, his analysis of one field seeks to show how and when certain differences, in this case of places and the people attached to them, become implicated in the domination of one by the other. Should anthropologists treat with similar suspicion "culture" and "cultures" as the key terms in a discourse in which otherness and difference have come to have, as Said points out, "talismanic qualities"?

THREE MODES OF WRITING AGAINST CULTURE

If "culture," shadowed by coherence, timelessness, and discreteness, is the prime anthropological tool for making "other," and difference, as feminists and halfies reveal, tends to be a relationship of power, then perhaps anthropologists should consider strategies for writing against culture. I will discuss three that I find promising. Although they by no means exhaust the possibilities, the sorts of projects I will describe – theoretical, substantive, and textual – make sense for anthropologists sensitive to issues of positionality and accountability and interested in making anthropological practice something that does not simply shore up global inequalities. . . .

Discourse and practice

Theoretical discussion, because it is one of the modes in which anthropologists engage each other, provides an important site for contesting culture. It seems to me that current discussions and deployments of two increasingly popular terms – practice and discourse – do signal a shift away from

culture. Although there is always the danger that these terms will come to be used simply as synonyms for culture, they were intended to enable us to analyze social life without presuming the degree of coherence that the culture concept has come to carry.

Practice is associated, in anthropology, with Bourdieu, whose theoretical approach is built around problems of contradiction, misunderstanding, and misrecognition, and favors strategies, interests, and improvisations over the more static and homogenizing cultural tropes of rules, models, and texts. Discourse has more diverse sources and meanings in anthropology. In its Foucauldian derivation, as it relates to notions of discursive formations, apparatuses, and technologies, it is meant to refuse the distinction between ideas and practices or text and world that the culture concept too readily encourages. In its more sociolinguistic sense, it draws attention to the social uses by individuals of verbal resources. In either case, it allows for the possibility of recognizing within a social group the play of multiple, shifting, and competing statements with practical effects. Both practice and discourse are useful because they work against the assumption of boundedness, not to mention the idealism, of the culture concept.

Connections

Another strategy of writing against culture is to reorient the problems or subject matter anthropologists address. An important focus should be the various connections and interconnections, historical and contemporary, between a community and the anthropologist working there and writing about it, not to mention the world to which he or she belongs and which enables him or her to be in that particular place studying that group. This is more of a political project than an existential one, although the reflexive anthropologists who have taught us to focus on the fieldwork encounter as a site for the construction of the ethnographic facts have alerted us to one important dimension of the connection. Other significant sorts of connections have received less attention. Pratt notes a regular mystification in ethnographic writing of “the larger agenda of European expansion in which the ethnographer, regardless of his or her own attitudes

to it, is caught up, and that determines the ethnographer’s own material relationship to the group under study.” We need to ask questions about the historical processes by which it came to pass that people like ourselves could be engaged in anthropological studies of people like those, about the current world situation that enables us to engage in this sort of work in this particular place, and about who has preceded us and is even now there with us (tourists, travelers, missionaries, AID consultants, Peace Corps workers). We need to ask what this “will to knowledge” about the Other is connected to in the world.

These questions cannot be asked in general; they should be asked about and answered by tracing through specific situations, configurations, and histories. Even though they do not address directly the place of the ethnographer, and even though they engage in an oversystemization that threatens to erase local interactions, studies like those of Wolf [*Europe and the People without History*] on the long history of interaction between particular Western societies and communities in what is now called the Third World represent important means of answering such questions. So do studies like Mintz’s [*Sweetness and Power*] that trace the complex processes of transformation and exploitation in which, in Europe and other parts of the world, sugar was involved. The anthropological turn to history, tracing connections between the present and the past of particular communities, is also an important development.

Not all projects about connections need be historical. Anthropologists are increasingly concerned with national and transnational connections of people, cultural forms, media, techniques, and commodities. They study the articulation of world capitalism and international politics with the situations of people living in particular communities. All these projects, which involve a shift in gaze to include phenomena of connection, expose the inadequacies of the concept of culture and the elusiveness of the entities designated by the term *cultures*. Although there may be a tendency in the new work merely to widen the object, shifting from culture to nation as locus, ideally there would be attention to the shifting groupings, identities, and interactions within and across such borders as well. If there was ever a time when anthropologists could consider without too much violence at least

some communities as isolated units, certainly the nature of global interactions in the present makes that now impossible.

Ethnographies of the particular

The third strategy for writing against culture depends on accepting the one insight of Geertz's about anthropology that has been built upon by everyone in this "experimental moment" who takes textuality seriously. Geertz has argued that one of the main things anthropologists do is write, and what they write are fictions (which does not mean they are fictitious). Certainly the practice of ethnographic writing has received an inordinate amount of attention from those involved in *Writing Culture* and an increasing number of others who were not involved. Much of the hostility toward their project arises from the suspicion that in their literary leanings they have too readily collapsed the politics of ethnography into its poetics. And yet they have raised an issue that cannot be ignored. Insofar as anthropologists are in the business of representing others through their ethnographic writing, then surely the degree to which people in the communities they study appear "other" must also be partly a function of how anthropologists write about them. Are there ways to write about lives so as to constitute others as less other?

I would argue that one powerful tool for unsettling the culture concept and subverting the process of "othering" it entails is to write "ethnographies of the particular." Generalization, the characteristic mode of operation and style of writing of the social sciences, can no longer be regarded as neutral description. . . .

There are two reasons for anthropologists to be wary of generalization. The first is that, as part of a professional discourse of "objectivity" and expertise, it is inevitably a language of power. On the one hand, it is the language of those who seem to stand apart from and outside of what they are describing. . . . On the other hand, even if we withhold judgment on how closely the social sciences can be associated with the apparatuses of management, we have to recognize how all professionalized discourses by nature assert hierarchy. The very gap between the professional and authoritative discourses of generalization and the languages

of everyday life (our own and others') establishes a fundamental separation between the anthropologist and the people being written about that facilitates the construction of anthropological objects as simultaneously different and inferior.

Thus, to the degree that anthropologists can bring closer the language of everyday life and the language of the text, this mode of making other is reversed. . . .

The second problem with generalization derives not from its participation in the authoritative discourses of professionalism but from the effects of homogeneity, coherence, and timelessness it tends to produce. When one generalizes from experiences and conversations with a number of specific people in a community, one tends to flatten out differences among them and to homogenize them. The appearance of an absence of internal differentiation makes it easier to conceive of a group of people as a discrete, bounded entity, like the "the Nuer," "the Balinese," and "the Awlad 'Ali Bedouin" who do this or that and believe such-and-such. The effort to produce general ethnographic descriptions of people's beliefs or actions tends to smooth over contradictions, conflicts of interest, and doubts and arguments, not to mention changing motivations and circumstances. The erasure of time and conflict make what is inside the boundary set up by homogenization something essential and fixed. These effects are of special moment to anthropologists because they contribute to the fiction of essentially different and discrete others who can be separated from some sort of equally essential self. Insofar as difference is, as I have argued, hierarchical, and assertions of separation a way of denying responsibility, generalization itself must be treated with suspicion.

For these reasons I propose that we experiment with narrative ethnographies of the particular in a continuing tradition of fieldwork-based writing. In telling stories about particular individuals in time and place, such ethnographies would share elements with the alternative women's tradition discussed above. I would expect them to complement rather than replace a range of other types of anthropological projects, from theoretical discussions to the exploration of new topics within anthropology. . . .

By focusing closely on particular individuals and their changing relationships, one would necessarily

subvert the most problematic connotations of culture: homogeneity, coherence, and timelessness. Individuals are confronted with choices, struggle with others, make conflicting statements, argue about points of view on the same events, undergo ups and downs in various relationships and changes in their circumstances and desires, face new pressures, and fail to predict what will happen to them or those around them. So, for example, it becomes difficult to think that the term "Bedouin culture" makes sense when one tries to piece together and convey what life is like for one old Bedouin matriarch.

When you ask her to tell the story of her life, she responds that one should only think about God. Yet she tells vivid stories, fixed in memory in particular ways, about her resistances to arranged marriages, her deliveries of children, her worries about sick daughters. She also tells about weddings she has attended, dirty songs sung by certain young men as they sheared the elders' sheep herds, and trips in crowded taxis where she pinched a man's bottom to get him off her lap.

The most regular aspect of her daily life is her wait for prayer times. Is it noon yet? Not yet. Is it afternoon yet? Not yet. Is it sunset yet? Grandmother, you haven't prayed yet? It's already past sunset. She spreads her prayer rug in front of her and prays out loud. At the end, as she folds up her prayer rug, she beseeches God to protect all Muslims. She recites God's names as she goes through her string of prayer beads. The only decoration in her room is a photograph on the wall of herself and her son as pilgrims in Mecca.

Her back so hunched she can hardly stand, she spends her days sitting or lying down on her mattress. She is practically blind and she complains about her many pains. People come and go, her sons, her nephews, her daughter, her nieces, her granddaughters, her great-grandson. They chat, they confer with her about connections between people, marriages, kinship. She gives advice; she scolds them for not doing things properly. And she plays with her great grandson, who is three, by teasing, "Hey, I've run out of snuff. Come here so I can sniff your little tuber."

Being pious and fiercely preserving protocol in the hosting of guests and the exchanging of visits and greetings does not seem to stop her from

relishing the outrageous story and the immoral tale. A new favorite when I saw her in 1987 was one she had just picked up from her daughter, herself a married mother of five living near Alamein. It was a tale about an old husband and wife who decide to go visit their daughters, and it was funny for the upside-down world it evoked.

This tale depicted a world where people did the unthinkable. Instead of the usual candy and biscuits, the couple brought their daughters sacks of dung for gifts. When the first daughter they stayed with went off to draw water from the well, they started dumping out all the large containers of honey and oil in her merchant husband's house. She returned to find them spilling everything and threw them out. So they headed off to visit the second daughter. When she left them minding her baby for a while, the old man killed it just to stop it from crying. She came back, discovered this and threw them out. Next they came across a house with a slaughtered sheep in it. They made belts out of the intestines and caps out of the stomachs and tried them on, admiring each other in their new finery. But when the old woman asked her husband if she didn't look pretty in her new belt he answered, "You'd be really pretty, except for that fly sitting on your nose." With that he smacked the fly, killing his wife. As he wailed in grief he began to fart. Furious at his anus for farting over his dead wife, he heated up a stake and shoved it in, killing himself.

The old woman chuckles as she tells this story, just as she laughs hard over stories about the excessive sexuality of old women. How does this sense of humor, this appreciation of the bawdy, go with devotion to prayer and protocols of honor? How does her nostalgia for the past – when the area was empty and she could see for miles around when she used to play as a little girl digging up the occasional potsherd or glass bottle in the area now fenced and guarded by the government Antiquities Organization; when her family migrated with the sheep herds and milked and made butter in desert pastures – go with her fierce defense of her favorite grandson, whose father was furious with him because the young man was rumored to have drunk liquor at a local wedding? People do not drink in the community, and drinking is, of course, religiously proscribed. What can "culture" mean given this old woman's complex responses?