

1

Introduction: New Writers of the Cultural Sage

From Postmodern Theory Shock to Critical Praxis

STEPHEN GILBERT BROWN and SIDNEY I. DOBRIN

A RECENT BODY OF SCHOLARSHIP has questioned the assumptions, aims, and methods of traditional ethnography—to the point of rendering it impracticable. How ethnography has reinvented itself in the wake of this postmodern critique is one of the more interesting, not to say significant, events in recent composition studies. Moreover, the emergence of critical ethnography in this postpositivist moment not only evidences the resilience of ethnographic inquiry, but the efficacy of a truly dialectical engagement between theory and practice in general, and between postmodern theory and critical ethnographic praxis in particular. Furthermore, the emergent discourse of critical ethnography has important implications for composition studies and particularly for pedagogies of cultural change. Finally, the discursive engagement between postmodern theory and critical ethnography is evolving into a new dialectic whose effects are moving beyond the deterministic toward the protean—toward a new ethnographic praxis informed by postmodern theory, yet moving beyond the limitations of it.

As evidenced by its evolving, diversified response to this postmodern critique, critical ethnography is discovering new sites for praxis, occupying new theoretical topoi, developing new signifying practices, articulating a new

ethnographic subject, redefining its goals, reinventing its methodologies, and revising its assumptions in what constitutes a radical ontological and epistemological transformation. In its emergent, postpositivist incarnation, critical ethnography is personalizing, politicizing, and socializing its praxis: it is politicizing the ends of ethnographic inquiry and socializing the process of ethnographic knowledge-making, while rediscovering its own critical voice with which it is beginning to “talk back” to postmodern theory to answer the fundamental questions the postmodern assault on traditional ethnographic practice raised.

The questions driving this new critical praxis have serious epistemological and ontological implications, and are deeply embedded with ethical and political connotations, as evinced by a selective recapitulation of them. Is ethnography possible in this postpositivist moment? Has postmodern theory rendered ethnographic practice obsolete, emptied it of all relevant content? Is the sign of positivist ethnography an empty signifier? What is the ethnographer’s role in the wake of this postmodern assault? Can logos and ethos coexist in the ethnographic field? Can both inform praxis? What new goals, methods, and assumptions is ethnography evolving in response to the theoretical imperatives of this postmodern critique? How is it responding to the “crisis of representation,” which of all of criticism’s effects has been the most problematic? What role does signification play in the discursive power struggle between postmodern theory and ethnographic practice? To what extent is the practical being determined by the rhetorical? To what extent is the traditional field site being expanded to include the rhetorical in ethnographic inquiry? What does the discursive power struggle between theory and praxis reveal about the signifying practices of each? And, more important, what are the implications for composition studies in general, and for critical ethnography in particular? Can democracy long survive when the accumulation of power and the acquisition of knowledge are divested of ethos? Can critical ethnography contribute to the liberatory struggles of the oppressed for the democratic redistribution of power within and beyond U.S. borders? And finally, as Sharon Stevens asks, “what type of validity does our knowledge have?” (220).

As the ethnographies in this collection evidence, this discourse is emerging across a diverse range of field sites in the process redefining virtually every aspect of ethnographic research: our concept of a field site, of the ethnographic Self, of the relationship between ethnographer and participant, and of the desired outcomes of ethnographic inquiry. From urban schools in Great Britain to rural communities in Nebraska, from the signifying practices of stakeholders in the ecowars of the Sonoran Desert to cultural materialist analyses of the logic of the marketplace, critical ethnography is manifesting its

protean relevance to pedagogies of cultural change. Having been placed under erasure for decades by positivist ethnographic assumptions, the ethnographic Self is finally beginning to sign itself into existence, to convert its pseudohierarchical absence into a dialectical presence not only with its readers but also with its participants. Furthermore, it now approaches participants as potential collaborators, not as exotic Others to be objectified by definitive scientific signs, as part of a reconfigured knowledge-making process that is social and whose ends are political. Additionally, critical ethnography is finally showing signs of recovering from the “theoretical anxiety” of the postmodern critique that temporarily disabled and almost permanently crippled it.

As it rediscovers its own theoretical and pedagogical legs, critical ethnography is beginning to move beyond the issues of the postmodern critique that gave birth to it, to move beyond its engagement with this theoretical critique to reimmersion in critical praxis: a praxis that is theoretically informed, methodologically dialectical, and politically and ethically oriented given its concerns for transformative cultural action. It is critiquing its critics, liberating itself from the reductive, contradictory chains of postmodern signification, opening up new critical spaces for itself, evolving a critical praxis that is at once emergent and immersed.

Make no mistake about it, the postmodern critique of positivist ethnography was a catastrophic event in the history of that discourse. Having finally recovered from the shock of this theoretical and practical meltdown, critical ethnography is once again striking off in directions as innovative as they were unforeseen. A significant debt is nevertheless owed to postmodern theory for “clearing the way,” and more important, for showing the way, for redirecting the critical gaze of ethnography away from science and toward politics, away from the interests of the ethnographic Self and toward a concern for altering the material conditions that determine the lived reality of the Other. Nevertheless, this critique, as is often the case in discursive power struggles, was guilty of theoretical and rhetorical overkill, its own analyses ironically flawed by faulty assumptions, reductive representations, and contradictory imperatives: inadequacies exposed by the counter-critique of critical ethnography.

Insofar as this introduction constitutes a point of departure into this collection, we feel proffering a definition of *critical ethnography* is useful at this juncture. Beverly Moss provides a succinct and useful distinction between ethnography and critical ethnography: “While ethnography in general is concerned with describing and analyzing a culture, ethnography in composition studies . . . is concerned more narrowly with communicative behavior or the interrelationship of language and culture.” Mary Jo Reiff concurs (*Ethnography and Composition* 156):

Ethnography in rhetoric-composition, particularly as a pedagogical approach, is concerned not just with the lived experience or behavior of cultures (as in anthropology or sociology) but with the way in which this behavior manifests itself rhetorically—what Dell Hymes calls “ethnography of communication.”

Lance Massey endorses Reiff’s view, observing that the focus of critical ethnography is an “adequate account of the literate practices of others.” Robert Brooke and Charlotte Hogg proffer an equally useful, if more nuanced, definition of critical ethnography:

We understand critical ethnography as a research practice, primarily related to education, whose purpose is to use dialogue about a cultural context to develop critical action, while remaining highly attuned to the ethics and politics of representation in the practice and reporting of that dialogue and resulting actions. (161)

The origins of critical ethnography are partially rooted in the theories and fieldwork of Paulo Freire, “and moves through Ira Shor and Henry Giroux in contemporary American education” (161).

The ethical, political, and social turn in critical ethnography derives not only from Freirean praxis, however, but from the intellectual tradition of academic feminism, whose “interest in ethics,” as Mortensen and Kirsch observe, “arises from frustration with a kind of ethical relativism that has often overtaken—and paralyzed—discussions of subjectivity and agency in postmodern theories of culture” (xxi). Feminists’ concerns with agency, the ethics of representation, the emancipatory ends of research (“for women rather than on women”), and the “multiple and shifting subject positions we inhabit” (xxi) prefigure the postmodern paradigmatic shifts in critical ethnography. The questions driving feminist inquiry similarly anticipate the postmodern interrogation of positivist ethnographic practice: “Who benefits from the research? Whose interests are at stake? What are the consequences for participants?” (xxi). Mortensen and Kirsch continue:

As a consequence of feminist interventions, as well as (sometimes conflicting) contributions from poststructural and postcolonial theorists, we have come to recognize how hierarchies and inequalities (marked by gender, race, class, social groupings, and more) are transferred onto and reproduced within participant-researcher relations. (xxi)

In other words, critical ethnography lives in the dialectical relationship between the Word and the World: a dialectic that it seeks to regenerate, operating from an assumed faith in the procreative power of any dialectic. Here is where Giroux’s theories on the dialectic between education and culture, par-

ticularly as enunciated in *Theory and Resistance in Education*, prove most useful. Critical ethnography, then, is but one of several discourses that seeks to extend Freirean theory and praxis into American contexts by combining radical pedagogy and writing research. As Brooke and Hogg observe, “critical ethnography emerges from an extensive body of work in critical pedagogy in which the goal of teaching is to engage the students (or other groups of learners) in the dialogic work of understanding their social location and developing cultural actions appropriate to that location” (161). Building on this Freirean tradition, scholars such as Bruce Horner theorize critical ethnography under the sign of “labor” and “work” to emphasize the intrinsically social and collaborative nature of it.

Unlike traditional ethnographic practice, critical ethnography shifts the goal of praxis away from the acquisition of knowledge about the Other (either for its own sake or in the service of the ethnographer’s career) to the formation of a dialogic relationship with the Other whose destination is the social transformation of material conditions that immediately oppress, marginalize, or otherwise subjugate the ethnographic participant. This reconfigured praxis seeks to actualize both aspects of the Freirean educational dialectic, in which critical analysis of localized and politicized problems is but a springboard into meaningful action to mitigate, legislate, or eliminate those problems. The activating agent for this analysis-into-action dialectic is the ethnographer-other dyad: is the emerging, peerlike partnership between ethnographer and participant in which the student-other is empowered as a coinvestigator of a problem that is critically analyzed in collaboration with the ethnographer as a precondition for evolving an action plan to meaningfully and effectively engage the problem. We believe the ethnographies in this collection eloquently signify the continuing relevance, resilience, and innovation of field-based research that is helping restore a protean dialectic between theory and praxis.

NEW WRITERS OF THE CULTURAL SAGE

Ethnography Unbound commences with four ethnographies clustered under the signs of the *theoretical* and the *rhetorical*. In “Critical Ethnography, Ethics, and Work: Rearticulating Labor,” Bruce Horner reinforces the protean dialectic between theory and practice in general, and between cultural materialist perspectives and critical praxis in particular. Horner’s nuanced critique exposes the limitations of postmodern theory, particularly its reductive representation of the ethnographic Self under the sign of “the Lone Ethnographer.” The sophistication of Horner’s critique effectively situates his work at the cutting edge of critical ethnography. More important, however, is the liberatory effect

his countercritique will have on critical praxis by freeing it from such disabling signifiers as the Lone Ethnographer and by foregrounding the inherently collaborative nature of all ethnographic writing.

Mary Jo Reiff's chapter, "Mediating Materiality and Discursivity: Critical Ethnography as Metageneric Learning," similarly foregrounds signifying practices and the rhetorical. Reiff situates ethnography as a "genre" that mediates between the ethnographer and the culture under observation, that mediates between the rhetorical and the social, that shifts ethnographic inquiry from the material to the symbolic—or rather, resituates it in the protean intersection between the cultural and the rhetorical: one that integrates texts and contexts. Her work, consequently, recuperates a generative dialectic between "lived experiences and lived textuality" (55).

In "The Ethnographic Experience of Postmodern Literacies," Christopher Schroeder models a classroom ethnography in which critical praxis is informed by postmodern theory and that evidences the usefulness of a cultural materialist approach in particular. As with Horner, Schroeder develops a nuanced analysis of the material conditions that influence and inform the construction of ethnographic knowledge, not only in the academy but also in the culture by which it is encompassed. Schroeder brings student voices into play perhaps more effectively than any chapter in this collection, in a "co-performance" that raises important questions about power and representation.

Gwen Gorzelsky, likewise, foregrounds the rhetorical, and particularly the figurative, in her chapter, "Shifting Figures: Rhetorical Ethnography." Gorzelsky foregrounds ethnography's solidarity with political struggles in a project that explores the useful intersections between figurative self-reflexivity, ethics, and social transformation. Informed by Bateson and Gestalt's theories, her analysis recuperates a metaphoric dialectic between participation and observation.

Lynée Lewis Gaillet also explores the symbiotic relationship between the ethnographic and the rhetorical in her chapter, "Writing Program Redesign: Learning from Ethnographic Inquiry, Civic Rhetoric, and the History of Rhetorical Education." In this chapter, Gaillet links ethnography to civic discourse, conjoining service learning and political controversies in a unified project that reinvigorates the eighteenth century and Isocratean ideal of the public intellectual. Gaillet establishes the efficacy of writing with a "civic tongue" to develop writing programs informed by civic rhetoric, grounded in the concept of *civitas*.

A second group of ethnographies are organized under the subheading "Place-Conscious Ethnographies: Situating Praxis in the Field." In "Open to Change: Ethos, Identification, and Critical Ethnography in Composition Studies," Robert Brooke and Charlotte Hogg reinvigorate the protean dialectic

tic between theory and praxis. They theorize critical ethnography from a Freirean perspective, noting the contributions of Shor and Giroux. In a critique as nuanced as it is useful, Brooke and Hogg problematize Ralph Cinton's deployment of Aristotelean ethos, approaching ethos instead from a Burkean perspective. They theorize the constructed nature of ethnographic knowledge, envisioning the field site as emerging through the "crucial filter" of ethnography. This theoretical analysis is situated in two very site-specific projects that not only complete the dialectic between theory and praxis, but also evince the efficacy of community-based, project-oriented ethnographies in particular.

In "State Standards in the United States and the National Curriculum in the United Kingdom: Political Siege Engines against Teacher Professionalism?" John Sylvester Lofty similarly revitalizes the dialectic between theory and praxis, between theoretical texts and ethnographic contexts. Lofty brings two site-specific case studies into metaphoric juxtaposition to illustrate the effects of "legislated literacy" on teacher professionalism across national boundaries. Lofty's inquiry is at once a nuanced interrogation of hierarchical power relations, liberatory resistance, and identity politics as well as an articulate argument for the efficacy of teacher autonomy versus the educational determinants of state mandates.

Sharon McKenzie Stevens, likewise, models a "place-conscious" critical praxis that invigorates the dialectic between postmodern theory and ethnographic practice. In "Debating Ecology: Ethnographic Writing that 'Makes a Difference,'" Stevens successfully fuses two emerging discourses: ecomposition and critical ethnography, creating in the process a new, metageneric discourse, ecoethnography. As is the case with Brooke and Hogg's inquiry, the field site here emerges through the filter of the ethnographer's interpretative stance. Stevens responds to the "crisis of representation" and the "implied ethical imperatives" of the postmodern critique of positivist ethnography by personalizing and politicizing ethnographic inquiry: responses that will prove useful to critical ethnographers negotiating similar "crises" and "imperatives." Stevens draws on Donna Haraway's concept of "diffraction" to capture the dialogic nature of the relationship between field site and ethnographer in a manner that resonates with Brooke and Hogg's use of the sign *filter*. Stevens's inquiry similarly emphasizes the "relational" nature of critical ethnography, foregrounding the assertion that knowledge-making is a function of a "web of relations," of a "relationship-conscious ethnography."

A third group of critical ethnographies is organized under the sign of "the ethnographic Self," insofar as they depict the "reorganization of the self in the field." In "Critical Auto/Ethnography: A Constructive Approach to Research

in the Composition Classroom,” Susan S. Hanson joins the effort to open up a new “space within ethnography to locate the self” (257) by fusing autobiography and ethnography into a new genre: critical auto/ethnography: one that is deeply informed by the discourses of feminist autobiography and postcolonial theory.

Christopher Keller similarly situates his argument in the debates swirling around the ethnographic Self. In “Unsituating the Subject: ‘Locating’ Composition and Ethnography in Mobile Worlds,” Keller evidences the critical role signifying practices play in the postpositivist ethnographic moment. Keller interrogates the usefulness of ethnography for composition studies in an effort to embed it more meaningfully within that discourse. To date, it has floated too freely beyond the disciplinary bounds of composition, gravitating toward anthropology. To solve this dilemma, Keller argues the efficacy of evolving a new research methodology, of enacting a new genre: one that is situated more meaningfully within the domain of composition. He articulates this methodology under the sign of psychography in a provocative illustration of the way critical ethnographers are reinventing signifying practices to reinvent critical praxis. Keller’s argument explodes the hierarchical binary between ethnography and composition, liberating composition into its own ethnographic terrain.

Issues of self-reflexivity also comprise the focus of Janet Alsup’s chapter, “Protean Subjectivities: Qualitative Research and the Inclusion of the Personal.” Alsup critiques the recent trend toward the personal in ethnographic research, enunciating a more nuanced, “thoughtful, purposeful, reasoned” inclusion of it. Her interrogation of disciplinary authority problematizes the acquisition of knowledge as an end in itself, privileging instead a praxis that uses knowledge as a collaborative means to political ends, that situates the ethnographic Self in social solidarity with the Other, as part of a knowledge-making dialectic that favors a “reciprocal, nonunitary subjectivity.” The sociopolitical orientation of Alsup’s research anticipates the final two chapters in this collection.

A fourth group of critical ethnographies is situated under the subhead, “Ethnographies of Cultural Change.” A concern for the political ends of praxis characterizes these inquiries, which shifts ethnographic praxis away from the realms of a self-serving science to the Other-oriented domain of the political. In “Changing Directions: Participatory-Action Research, Agency, and Representation,” Bronwyn T. Williams and Mary Brydon-Miller foreground the necessity of linking ethnographic analysis to cultural action. As do Horner, and Brooke and Hogg, they situate “participatory-action research” within the tradition of Freirean praxis, as evidenced by their emphasis of “social reflexivity” and “social justice.” Williams and Brydon-Miller elaborate a critical ethnography that is not the by-product of a fixed, unified discourse,

but the site of multiple discourses dispersed across a field of signification ranging from the personal to the political, the symbolic to the material, the urban to the rural, and the corporeal to the virtual.

Lance Massey, similarly, foregrounds the political in his work, "Just What *Are We Talking About?* Disciplinary Struggle and the Ethnographic Imaginary." Responding to the postmodern attack on the goals of positivist ethnography, Massey articulates a new set of outcomes, privileging agency, empowerment, and transformative action over a pseudoscientific, self-serving, apolitical "knowledge" producing apparatus. Massey provides a useful and nuanced analysis of "theoretical anxiety," of the postmodern theory shock that temporarily disabled ethnographers by virtue of the critical binds and seemingly contradictory imperatives to which it subjected them. As with many ethnographies in this collection, Massey's recuperates the protean dialectic between theory and praxis, advocating a praxis that is not only informed by theory but in which the pragmatic is oriented toward the political.

Our collection closes with two "response" pieces, coupled under the heading, "Texts and (Con)texts: Intertextual Voices." In "The Ethics of Reading Critical Ethnography," Min-Zhan Lu responds to many of the ethnographers in this collection, using their arguments to inform her own. Of the many debates being contested in the discourse of critical ethnography, perhaps none is more lively than the debate over ethics. Min-Zhan's chapter not only evidences the centrality of this debate, but also shifts it into new, unexamined terrain: arguing not just for an ethics of writing, but for an ethics of reading. She challenges readers of ethnographic discourse to evolve a self-reflexive ethos as rigorous as the ethics they expect of ethnographers. Moreover, she innovatively posits the construction and practice of an ethnographic ethos as an enabling dialectic between ethnographers and readers, in which an ethics of reading complements an ethics of praxis, in which readers participate in the making and practice of ethnographic ethics. Her critique of postmodern interrogations of ethnography is grounded in a nuanced analysis of the material conditions that influence the production of ethnographic texts and discourse, that "enable and constrain disciplinary knowledge production."

In "Beyond Theory Shock: Ethos, Knowledge, and Power in Critical Ethnography," Stephen Gilbert Brown analyzes the responses of the critical ethnographers in this collection to the postmodern critique of positivist ethnography. Brown focuses on five aspects of ethnography's critical response to postmodern theory in this postpositivist moment: its liberatory counter-critique; the politicization of its goals; the socialization of its methods; the personalization of its voice; and the reinvention of its rhetorical strategies. Additionally, he assesses the implications of these critical responses, not only for critical ethnography, but also for all pedagogies of cultural change.

WORKS CITED

- Mortensen, Peter, and Gesa E. Kirsch. *Ethics and Representation in Qualitative Studies of Literacy* Fwd. by Andrea Lunsford. Intro. by Mortensen and Kirsch. NCTE (1996): i–xxxiv.
- Moss, Beverly. “Ethnography and Composition: Studying Language at Home.” *Methods and Methodologies in Composition Research*. Ed. Gesa Kirsch and Patricia Sullivan. Carbondale: SIUP, 1992. 153–71.