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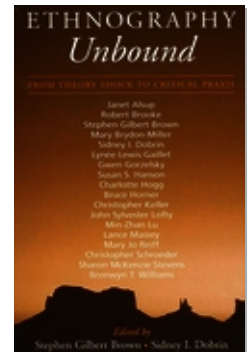
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Beyond Theory Shock

Ethos, Knowledge, and Power in Critical Ethnography

STEPHEN GILBERT BROWN

THIS CHAPTER THEORIZES VARIOUS aspects of the discursive power struggle between ethnographic research and the postmodern critique of it—an analysis with broader implications not only for pedagogies of cultural change but also for the dialectical relation between theory and practice in general. I review critical ethnography's strategic responses to the postmodern critique of traditional positivist ethnography, commencing with its countercritique of postmodern theory and concluding with an assessment of the implications for composition studies. I also map some of the new theoretical, rhetorical, and practical terrain critical ethnography occupies as it moves beyond postmodern criticism into a theoretically-informed critical praxis.

Critical ethnography is not a univocal, but a polyphonic discourse; it is not a unitary and fixed discourse as it was in its positivist incarnation, but multiple and shifting, characterized by what Juan Guerra describes as a “nomadic consciousness.” It is deeply informed by the postmodern critique of its positivist predecessor; it is redefining if not reinventing itself, even as it moves beyond that critique into exciting, never before occupied, postpositivist terrains.

IN THE CROSSHAIRS OF THE THEORETICAL GAZE:
THE POSTMODERN CRITIQUE OF ETHNOGRAPHY

As a discursive relic of a colonial era, it was simply a matter of time before the arcane epistemology of traditional ethnography fell under the critical post-modern gaze.

Postmodern theory found an object worthy of its attention when it turned its critical gaze to the largely unexamined goals, assumptions, and methods of traditional, positivist ethnography. Its critique was as incisive as it was comprehensive, as evidenced by a selective litany of its criticisms: the participant's voice was regularly, if not systematically, subsumed by the ethnographer's, was silenced throughout the research-to-publication process; the entire ethnographic project was univocal and hierarchical, foregrounding the interests of the researcher while ignoring the ambitions of the participant; the ethnographic endeavor unwittingly reinforced negative stereotypes of the exotic Other, who was reduced to an object of study while serving the careerist goals of the ethnographer; field research thus often replicated the oppressive effects, if not the material conditions, of colonization, in which the Other found herself not only at the wrong end of a colonial gun but at the short end of an imperial pen; furthermore, the "material conditions of existence" were often omitted from the inquiry, or their inclusion in thick descriptions was unaccompanied by any concern for their transformation in an inquiry that privileged "scientific objectivity" over social progress and the acquisition of knowledge over the colonial effects of the knowledge-making process. Furthermore, the claims to objectivity of the positivist paradigm were called into question, as was its habitual practice of putting the ethnographic Self under erasure. Theory lamented and lambasted the purported "textual absence" of the ethnographer. As Brooke and Hogg observe in "Open to Change," "arrival in the field was followed by willed removal or withdrawal to a more distant 'scientific' stance." While purporting to be about the Other, positivist ethnography was in reality all about the ethnographic Self, which it nevertheless pretended to efface. Knowledge of the Other was but a means of asserting a narcissism of the ethnographic self, to produce writing that privileged the Self even in the act of representing the Other, that was self-serving in its careerist orientations and outcomes. Consequently, the Other was silenced even in the act of being represented, was put under erasure even while under study.

Postmodern theory has demonstrated that claims of scientific objectivity in the knowledge-making industry were as mythical as they were unethical. How, they ask, can an ethnographic Self ever definitively represent the Other, as implied by claims of epistemological authority? As Bruce Horner succinctly asserts in "Critical Ethnography, Ethics, and Work," the postmodern critique

of traditional ethnography, “highlights the partiality and historicity of knowledge and experience.” Postmodern theory invalidated not only the goals and methods, but one of the fundamental assumptions of ethnographic inquiry: that “knowledge” is a *de facto*, transcendent, *a priori* signified that can be discovered and possessed through observation. In contradistinction, postmodern critics theorize knowledge as something that is negotiated between knowledge-makers, that is not “found” but constructed, linguistically. Knowledge is language and language is social. Knowledge is not only the shadow of a sign, but also dwells in the shadows between signs, dwells in and between and beyond the signifying chains that can only always and forever represent it in its partiality. This view of the knowledge-making process undermines the ontological and epistemological claims of positivist ethnography, which asserts definitive and objective representations of the Other, which are in essence partial and subjective.

The effects of this postmodern critique have been pronounced, rendering traditional ethnography virtually impracticable and placing its practitioners in a bind from which they are struggling to liberate themselves. Postmodern theory has refocused the ethnographic gaze, not only toward the ethnographic Self, but toward the ethics of its means and the politics of its ends. Instead of knowledge about the Other, the ethics of the knowledge-making process has become the focus of ethnographic inquiry. Instead of being an end in itself, studying the Other is now merely the means to a greater political end: altering the material conditions of oppression.

The effect, as Sharon McKenzie Stevens observes, has been toward a more “ethical and self-aware ethnographic authority,” which has altered “the possibilities of representation and knowledge production.” Goals, methods, and assumptions have all been reconfigured. Stevens continues: the “old anthropological ideal of definitively describing . . . a studied culture is now considered unobtainable,” so thoroughly has the postmodern critique “altered our view of culture as a ‘static system’ that can be unproblematically objectified.” This critique has exploded the positivist binary of observer-participant with theoretical claymores, calling into question not only the claims, but also the ethics of the positivist knowledge-taking apparatus.

Perhaps theory’s most debilitating effect on ethnographic inquiry is the tyranny of a set of seemingly contradictory imperatives, one of which has produced a “crisis of representation.” How can the ethnographer exist without representing the Other? Are representation of the Other and ethnographic inquiry mutually exclusive? Can the ethnographer foreground his or her presence without further marginalizing the Other? Or is such self-reflexivity inherently narcissistic and inevitably exclusionary? Ethnographers, consequently, find themselves trapped in the double bind of this imperative to

acknowledge their own presence without further marginalizing participant voices. If each act of speaking is also an act of silencing, the question arises: can the ethnographer speak at all? This has produced an epidemic of “theoretical anxiety,” or theory shock, amongst ethnographers. As Horner observes, the postmodern critique “has placed an impossible set of responsibilities on the shoulders of the critical ethnographer.”

Ethnographers are evolving “alternate strategies for responding to this dilemma” (Horner). What is emerging from the rhetorical ruins of this critique is something altogether different, and yet the same. It still goes by the name of ethnography, although that is where the similarity ends. Ethnographers have abandoned the old goals, assumptions, and methods for new ones adapted to the rigorous ethical imperatives of the postpositivist moment. It is protean, renescent, and liberatory. It is ethical, political, and social. It has reestablished the vital link between theory and praxis, among ethos, knowledge, and power. A new dialectic is emerging between critical praxis and postmodern theory—one that revitalizes possibilities of altering material conditions and hierarchical, asymmetrical power relations through an emerging solidarity between ethnographer and participant.

ETHNOGRAPHY’S RESPONSE: DIALECTICS, DISCOURSE, AND POWER

How critical ethnographers are reinventing their craft to meet the imperatives of postmodern theory is one of the most interesting and instructive struggles in composition studies. Their responses are as significant as they are diverse. They are, for instance, using theory to reinvent praxis even as theory was deployed to invalidate positivist practice. Additionally, critical ethnographers are countering postmodern criticism with criticisms of their own, calling into question the claims and assumptions of theory itself, critiquing its tendency toward rhetorical overkill, exposing its own contradictions and questionable ethics, articulating limits to the postmodern polemic. If theory brought an ax for chopping down ethnography, then critical ethnographers are setting about the work of reinventing it with the saws of signification, converting positivist practice into critical praxis: one in which the ethnographer is more reflexive, the process more dialogic, and the outcomes more political.

Critical ethnography is synthesizing the personal and the political. It has personalized and politicized ethnography in ways the positivist paradigm prevented. Further, it is generating antithetical tensions to the theses of the postmodern critique, and the result is an emerging hybrid of theory and praxis, of the personal and the political. The incompatibility of positivist practice and

postmodern theory has given way to the reintegration of theory and praxis in critical ethnography, as it evolves out of theory a new praxis. Reacting to the postmodern critique, these researchers have personalized, socialized, and politicized ethnographic inquiry, creating a praxis that is informed by “collaboration, multi-vocality and self reflexivity” (Horner). Finally, new methods, goals, and assumptions require a new language. Consequently, critical ethnographers are adopting new signifying practices to define their praxis: a praxis informed by the theoretical imperatives of the postmodern critique, which gestures toward the social, the political, and the personal, and in which *logos* is infused with *ethos*.

In the aftermath of the postmodern assault, ethnography has undergone a discursive diaspora. It now flourishes under the sign of the fugitive, the exilic, the nomadic, the dispossessed and the repossessed. Its nascent, post-critical signifying practices are nothing if not strategies of Self possession—oriented toward the reclamation of an ethnographic Self evacuated by postmodern theory, toward the regeneration of a Self that is not theoretically determined, but linguistically and ethnographically protean. An element of mobility has always been associated with ethnography given the necessity of remote field sites. Now it is redefining the concept of “field site,” broadening and configuring it to meet the imperatives of postmodern theory, to include linguistic sites and site-specific discourse communities within the country, the community, and the classroom.

Critical ethnography is confounding theory with its fugitive signs, even as it refocuses its critical gaze on the signifying practices of site-specific discourse communities, from the realms of labor and academe to corporate and rural America. As the chapters in this collection evidence, if postmodern theory has evacuated positivist ethnography of its content, of its goals, assumptions, and methods, then something vital and imperishable has escaped: a fugitive spore that, alas, has found fertile, if foreign, ground beyond the chains of postmodern signification. Ethnography in this postpositivist moment has foregrounded *ethos* in both the making of knowledge and the ends it serves, which inevitably involve the democratic redistribution of power through culture.

Critical ethnography is effectively waging a liberatory struggle of counter-criticism against postmodern theory—talking back, as it were, to the theoretical discourse that would master it. In the process, it is liberating praxis from theory, as it takes possession of a new ethnographic Self that is in fact not one, but many selves, not a unified, fixed, autonomous Self, but a multiple, nomadic, dialogic Subject whose inquiries, as these chapters evince, are dispersed across a broad spectrum of field sites. Yet, of all ethnography’s diverse responses to postmodern criticism, perhaps its own counter-critique has had the most liberatory effect.

SIGN/COUNTERSIGN: ETHNOGRAPHY'S
CRITIQUE OF POSTMODERN THEORY

Power circulates in discourse and when power is possessed, it is wielded—as it was by the postmodern critique of positivist ethnography, which by virtue of its uncritically examined assumptions, methods, and aims was vulnerable to such an overdue and systematic dismantling of its practice: one that not only called into question the validity of ethnographic research, but threatened it with extinction as well. The ethnographic response evidences the imperishable impulse of resistance, the tendency of discourse to be always and forever dialectical instead of absolutely dominant, as Giroux repeatedly and eloquently reminds us in *Theory and Resistance in Education* (recently revised and expanded, 2001). Ethnography's "back talk" to postmodern theory evidences the dialectical nature of all discourse, revealing the power dynamics between residual, dominant, and emerging discourses. The operation of these three discourses is never absolute and disjointed, but dialectical and concomitant. They are always in play with each other, as evidenced by the interplay of positivist ethnographic discourse, the postmodern critique of it, and an emerging post-positivist, ethnographic discourse. Postcolonial discourse can be particularly useful for understanding the dialectical tension between this postmodern critique and critical ethnography, which I am positing as a tension that is always in play between dominant and emerging discourses. There is, moreover, between competing discourses a struggle for power: between a tendency toward the absolute power of a dominant discourse and a countertendency toward the liberatory agency of an emerging discourse, which is not only brought into existence by the dominance of the first, but also enervated by it. This is evident in the emerging dialectic between critical ethnography and the postmodern critique of traditional positivist ethnography.

Critical ethnography is deeply engaged in a discursive struggle for its own agency, if not survival, as evidenced by the vitality and resourcefulness of its counter-criticism of postmodern theory. This counter-criticism has finally contained the postmodern assault in the process facilitating its own liberatory break out into new linguistic and research terrains. A discourse whose signs were initially defined by the signs they countered is now emerging into the autonomous and liberatory spaces of a new ethnographic Self, posited in dialogic relationship to research participants, oriented toward the liberatory redistribution of power, often in new, rhetorically configured field sites. Before proceeding, I would like to analyze the assertions of this counter-critique, which if not the first, is nevertheless one of the most significant responses of critical ethnography to the mandates of postmodern theory.

As evidenced by the emerging arguments of its practitioners, critical ethnography is rediscovering its own critical voice in dialectical engagement

with the polemics of postmodern discourse. At the leading edge of this counter-critique are theorists such as Bruce Horner, who are calling into question some of the fundamental assumptions driving the postmodern critique, including its reliance on the Myth of the Lone Ethnographer. In contradistinction to the claims of postmodern critics, Horner asserts that all ethnography is collaborative in nature, particularly when viewed from a cultural materialist perspective. Ethnography, Horner avers, is no different from any other form of labor and no less social in nature. Like any labor, it does not occur in a social vacuum, but is the result of many collaborations at every phase of the production of knowledge, from its construction to its consumption. Horner posits the critical ethnographer as a laborer, and his work as a material practice “aimed at altering the physical and social environment.”

Horner’s counter-critique provides a more nuanced view of the ethnographic Self than the reductive representations of the postmodern critique, which seek to contain all ethnographers under the misleading sign of the Lone Ethnographer operating in a social vacuum. Collaboration in the field is the means by which knowledge is constructed. Collaboration between writer, participants, editors, publishers, reviewers, and indirectly with the readers also characterizes the construction of knowledge in the post field-site phase. Throughout this knowledge-making process, meaning is made dialectically, through dialogue with others. It is less univocal than polyphonic. Its methods are inherently collaborative. In contrast to the reductive claims of the postmodern critique, Horner provides a nuanced problematic of the collaborative ideal that recuperates some of the epistemological and ontological terrain lost to the critique of positivist ethnography.

Horner’s criticism exposes an egregious, if ironic, contradiction in the postmodern polemic. While calling into question the ethics of ethnographic representations of the Other, criticism ignores the reductive tendencies of its own representations of the Lone Ethnographer—engendering its own “crisis of representation.” The question arises: should the critic and theorist be held to the same ethical imperative as the researcher—a point that Lu raises in “The Ethics of Reading Critical Ethnography.” Are the representations of postmodern critics as guilty of reinforcing negative stereotypes as the signifying practices of the positivist ethnographer they criticize? Reductive representations such as the Lone Ethnographer reinscribe the signifying practices of colonizing discourses by assigning an economy of subject positions to the signified—in this instance, the ethnographic Self. All ethnographers are the Same, contained under the simplified and debilitating sign of the Lone Ethnographer. He who lives by the signifying sword sometimes dies by it. By exploding the myth of the Lone Ethnographer and exposing the underlying contradictions of the postmodern critique, Horner provides a more enabling view of the ethnographic Self.

The efficacy of these counter-critiques is enabling critical ethnography to elucidate a radical episteme and a collaborative ontology that is at once informed by the ethical imperatives of theory even as it moves beyond the reductive limitations of it. The what, how, and why of ethnographic knowledge has been radically influenced by this postmodern polemic—and by ethnography's liberation from it: a liberation effected largely through signification. Counter-critiques such as Horner's revise our assessment of the postmodern attack on ethnographic inquiry: instead of deterministic and absolute, that influence is proving to be protean and dialectical. Initially debilitating, it is now proving to be protean, as ethnography recovers from the "theory shock" of the postmodern assault, finds that it is still a viable mode of research, reconfigures its goals, methods, and assumptions to privilege cultural actions, dialogic processes, and constructed knowledges—across a broad spectrum of research sites, adjusts to the postmodern "crisis of representation" and assimilates into its methodologies and goals the implied ethical imperatives of postpositivist praxis.

In a word, ethnography is exposing the limitations of a critique that so effectively exposed its own. It is moving toward a more dialectic engagement with theory and a more dialogic solidarity with participants. These counter-critiques are enabling insofar as they comprise a linguistic fire wall that frees critical ethnographers from the disabling imperatives of postmodern criticism, liberating them into new epistemological and ontological terrains. The evolution of this radical, postpositivist episteme begins with the reconfiguration of its ends.

BEGINNING AT THE END: THE POLITICS OF CULTURAL CHANGE

In response to the ethical imperatives of criticism, critical ethnography has radically altered its goals. The desired outcomes have shifted from the career-oriented pursuit of knowledge about the Other to fostering political agency with the Other. The acquisition of knowledge about the Other is now yoked to the political empowerment of the Other. Knowledge, instead of being an end in itself, is now the means to a political end; instead of solely serving the interests of the ethnographer, it now serves the needs and interests of the participant. The study of the Other is only justified if it is somehow linked to the transformation of oppressive material conditions. In this context, the theories and praxis of Paulo Freire manifest their relevance to critical ethnographers. Critical ethnography is thus situated at the intersection of radical pedagogy and postmodern theory.

Praxis must be used as a tool for building freedoms not just as a means of extracting knowledge. It must become a "context-fortifying" discourse as

opposed to a knowledge-extracting enterprise. It must forego its concern with extractable knowledges that it converts into books and articles to further its own ends, in favor of an interest in cultural change, in the liberatory redistribution of power. Knowledge should no longer be viewed as just another "extractable resource." As Bronwyn T. Williams and Mary Brydon-Miller assert, the focus of critical ethnography is "social inequality and economic disparity as they affect our classrooms and communities." It is, in the last analysis, enervated by a spirit of community activism. Its goal, as Brooke and Hogg assert, should be the development of "cultural action." The critical ethnographer seeks for ways to link ethnographic knowledge-making to political struggle, to position herself "within the complex of relations that constitute the cultural logics." The new aim, as Stevens asserts, is "analysis of cultural logics" and to "craft a more ethical and self-aware ethnographic authority." John Lofty endorses this political orientation, asserting that critical ethnography "explores key themes of power, resistance, identity politics and liberation," and represents ethnographers as "researchers for change." Gwen Gorzelsky similarly asserts that critical ethnography is concerned with "cultivating systematic change."

Intervention in the uneven and undemocratic distribution of power is now posited as an ethical imperative of ethnographic inquiry. The aim, as Gorzelsky asserts is to "cultivate systematic change by using our work with others to better see and change ourselves." This dramatic reconfiguration of ethnographic goals has been accompanied by a transformation of the ethnographic process.

METHODS OUT OF MADNESS: TOWARD A DIALOGIC PRAXIS

Responding to the ethical imperatives of criticism that have raised a host of "metamethodological issues," critical ethnographers are reinventing the methods of their praxis (Massey). Their adjustments to criticism are altering the dynamics of the observer-participant relation, which is now less hierarchical, more dialogic. In contradistinction to its positivist tendencies, the ethnographic knowledge-making process is now characterized by an emergent and empowering reciprocity between participants and observer. Consequently, a new dialogic pragmatism is emerging, reflecting a fundamental shift in attitude toward participants as collaborators and coinvestigators, evidencing a commitment "to enact a dialogic encounter between researcher and subject" (Gorzelsky).

This new critical praxis is grounded in social solidarity with the Other, in the ethical concerns of cultural change. It uses knowledge not to advance the career of the knowledge-taker, but to transform the material conditions that

degrade the lived reality of the participant. Here is where critical ethnography derives its ethical mandate, brings praxis, logos, and ethos together. As Horner asserts, ethnographers are responding to the “call for reimagining research practice as ‘praxis’ that is responsive to the local research site,” that is “context fortifying” as opposed to knowledge-extracting in its orientation.

Critical ethnography is not only being influenced by postmodern criticism, but is being informed by “feminist pragmatism,” by what Massey characterizes as an “ethics of care.” The story of ethnography in this postpositivist moment is largely the story of “how humanism in composition came to ethnography”—and to its methodologies in particular. As Horner observes, “the Other can now speak in the text,” can write collaboratively with the observer, who has broken away from the “univocality of research.” If its methods are characterized by this “dialogic process,” its goals are similarly to be achieved through “collaborative cultural action” (Brooke and Hogg).

This concern with yoking research to cultural action not only gestures toward Freirean praxis but is reflected in the signifying practices with which critical ethnographers are defining their praxis, as evidenced by descriptions such as “Participatory-Action Research” (Williams and Brydon-Miller). The construction of knowledge is not only assumed to be “relational,” but also its outcomes political (Stevens). Knowledge is produced through dialogue between invested parties. This is “relationship conscious” ethnography. It is not an act of analysis but of interpenetration insofar as ethnographic inquiry is doubly sheathed in the experience of the ethnographer and in the lived reality of the participant, which are brought into dialectical contact in this knowledge-making process. Knowledge is, therefore, the outcome of a “web of relations”: a collaborative effect that is a precondition for collaborative cultural action.

Furthermore, such a theoretical framework validates a project-oriented praxis as the primary means to the social construction of knowledge. The efficacy of such a community-based, project-oriented praxis is evidenced in the recent work of critical ethnographers such as Brooke and Hogg. They posit the “community project” as the ideal vehicle for realizing the ends of critical ethnography insofar as it privileges a methodology grounded in cooperation between participants and observer, as opposed to its positivist predecessor that reinscribed a master-slave dialectic by placing the observer in an active position and the participant in a passive position with respect to the knowledge-making process. In this reinscription of Freirean praxis, participants are engaged as collaborators and coinvestigators of community problems, the analysis and mitigation of which constitute term-long projects, wherein the field site is extended from the classroom into the community, where classroom and community are brought into dialectical contact. This is a project-oriented approach toward a problem posing, problem solving ethnographic inquiry.

Furthermore, it is a praxis with obvious implications and applications for the emerging discourse of ecoethnography, where students “examine the ecology” of a local place in historical, legal, and scientific contexts, intervening in disputes between conservationists and economic stakeholders over water rights, logging, fishing, the reintroduction of wolves, or the recreational use of wilderness areas (Stevens). Critical ethnography is, in the final analysis, a relationship-conscious and a “place-conscious” mode of inquiry.

REORGANIZING THE SELF IN THE FIELD

Critical ethnography has responded to this crisis of representation not only by politicizing its goals and by socializing its methods, but also by personalizing its narratological voice. Positivist ethnography has had virtually every aspect of its practice called into question by criticism, including its tendency to put the ethnographic self under erasure in the name of scientific objectivity. This critique has generated some fundamental questions among ethnographers who wonder “what form of self reflexivity to adopt and to what purpose” (Stevens). The immediate effect of this criticism has been an overabundance of narratives foregrounding the personal experience of the ethnographer: a sort of narratological land rush in which ethnographers jumped aboard this bandwagon of the personal. This in turn has led to the additional, if somewhat contradictory, criticism that ethnography is now narcissistic in its self-reflexivity. By overreacting to criticism it has further marginalized or silenced the voice of the Other while foregrounding its own. Converting the absence of the ethnographic Self into a narratological presence has only amplified the absence of the Other. Criticism has thus placed critical ethnographers in a debilitating bind, creating a crisis of representation from which they are struggling to extract themselves. On the one hand they are criticized for putting the ethnographic Self under erasure; on the other they are attacked for foregrounding the experience of the ethnographer. Where to turn and what to do to escape this seeming critical bind?

Theory, criticism, and signification have enabled the critical ethnographer to escape this bind into a liberatory praxis. Criticized equally for omitting and including the Self in narratives, critical ethnographers have slipped the seeming noose of this double bind through countercriticisms of their own. Hanson, for example, argues that all writing is narcissistic, even non-self-reflexive discourse, proffering a more nuanced analysis than the reductive representations of the self-reflexive-ethnographer-as-narcissist proselytized by postmodern criticism, a complementary stereotype to the myth of the Lone Ethnographer. Countercritiques such as Hanson’s liberate ethnographers from the seeming bind of self reflexive representations. If narcissism is

a given of all writing, then the self-reflexive ethnographer is no more narcissistic than the postmodern critic.

Having effectively countered the criticism of self-reflexive narcissism, critical ethnography is adopting and developing narrative strategies that are openly, unapologetically, and partially self-reflexive. Forswearing all claims to objectivity, they are developing and deploying new signifiers that reflect their assumptions of a constructed knowledge. Ethnographers are, in the words of Hanson, acknowledging “that position affects perspective.” Renouncing the positivist stance of the ethnographer as an objective determiner of knowledge, they have instead situated the ethnographic Self in a dialectic space that foregrounds theories of “positionality.” Textual absence has given way to the “explicit presence of the ethnographer in representing practices” (Stevens). This is evidenced by the turn away from the objective and toward the subjective in general and by the proliferation of “arrival stories” and “autoethnographies” in particular.

Critical ethnographers are converting a false absence into an explicit presence under the sign of the personal, the subjective, and the autoethnographic, which adds another form of discourse to ethnography, creating a narrative which might be more usefully thought of as a “heteroglossic performance” (Hanson). Critical ethnographers are expanding the terrain of inquiry from the experiential and the political into the rhetorical, from the material into the symbolic, from the World into the Word, from the signified into the signifying, from a concern with the effects of analysis into the politics of representation. The ethnographic Self is now a sign that floats freely between the personal and the social, that lives and breathes in the dialectic space between the symbolic and the material, between the signified World of the Other and the signifying Word of the Self.

It has escaped the signifying shackles of a reductive criticism that contained it under the sign of the Lone Ethnographer, or “the objective scientist” into a free-floating, self-signifying agency across a spectrum of dialectic spaces it is discovering between the material and the symbolic. It is proliferating across a field of subject positions under the signs of “rhetorical ethnography” (Gorzelsky), “cultural materialist ethnography” (Horner), “autoethnography” (Hanson), “participatory-action research” (Williams and Brydon-Miller), “community-based, project-oriented ethnography” (Brooke and Hogg), “ecoethnography” (Stevens)—all converging under the sign of “critical ethnography.” While talking back to criticism in its own tongue, it is simultaneously moving beyond the limits and constraints of postmodern theory into new dialectical terrain between the widely dispersed, yet inherently related signs of the personal and the political, the autonomous and the relational, privileging a relationship-driven, resistance-oriented research. It explores the dialectical tensions between the “lived textuality” of ethno-

graphic writing and the “lived experience” of its participants, including the experience of the ethnographer (Reiff). Favoring a “politics of location” (Stevens), it constructs knowledges not as ends in themselves but as means to “social actions” (Reiff).

Furthermore, this tendency to foreground the explicit presence of the ethnographer has been accompanied by a similar tendency to privilege the presence of the participant. Thus, a Self-Other dyad formerly characterized respectively by a false and a genuine absence has been transformed into a relationship privileging a double presence. This has revolutionized the emerging discourse of critical ethnography. In the final analysis, ethnography has renounced an apolitical, scientific, hierarchical “objectivity” that never was for a more political, social, collaborative subjectivity oriented toward what might be.

Critical ethnography is therefore uniting the political and the personal, is tending toward political solidarity with the Other “without concealing what we learn about ourselves in the process.” If it foregrounds the Other as a collaborator, it also seeks to “to locate the self as a subject,” in the process discovering new spaces for itself in the field (Hanson). As evidenced by all these signifying strategies, critical ethnographers are occupying new narratological topoi.

In this postpositivist moment, the ethnographic Self has been reconstructed, if not reinvented. The ethical imperatives of criticism have generated a new organization of the Self in the field. It is a researching Self sensitive to the political interests of participants and committed to altering the material conditions that oppress participants. Furthermore, as the recent work of critical ethnographers shows, the ethnographic Self is not fixed and unitary but multiple and nomadic, proliferating across a continuum of research sites and occupying a broad spectrum of subject positions. In contradistinction to the reductive representations of the Lone Ethnographer and the “narcissistic ethnographer” imposed on them by theory, critical ethnographers are representing the ethnographic Self across a complex continuum of subject positions.

Ethnography’s ability to signify itself not as one but as many is but one of the signifying strategies it has adopted to ensure its survival in the face of the postmodern assault on virtually every aspect of its assumptions, goals, and methods. It is, moreover, a strategy similar to that adopted by the Other when confronted by the reductive signifying practices of the dominant culture. Ethnography, by virtue of its inherent multiplicity and nomadism, has slipped the chains of postmodern signification. In the grasp of an essentializing postmodern discourse, (the Lone Ethnographer) ethnography has proven itself too slippery to be reductively contained. Like any subject, the critical ethnographer is endowed with a slippery multiplicity that resists reductive theoretical representations. What is emerging is a revised sense of the ethnographic Self, not as autonomous but as connected, not as detached

from but as related to: a Self that is relational, dialogic, infused with a new, living dialectic between observer and participant, theory and practice, field site and classroom.

SIGNS OF STRUGGLE: THE REVOLUTION OF REPRESENTATION

Signification, as evidenced by the ethnographies of this collection, is playing a significant role in critical ethnography's liberatory struggle against postmodern theory. In this section I will selectively develop the implications of these signifying practices, which have transformed a deterministic theoretical monologue into a liberatory dialectic between theory and praxis. Signification is giving birth to a dialectic that is recuperating a measure of agency for critical ethnography. The word is liberating ethnography from the deterministic constraints of criticism into the protean spaces of praxis. Under a host of self-signifying signs, critical ethnography is transforming a crisis of representation into a revolution of representation, liberating new spaces for itself through a renascent dialectic between the material and the symbolic. A liberatory fusion of ethos, knowledge, and power is emerging from the dust of theoretical (con)fusion, ensuring the disciplinary survival, authority, and integrity of critical ethnography.

Signs of this struggle are evident in the struggle over "signs" in general, and over the sign of the "ethnographer" in particular, as postmodern theorists and critical ethnographers alike grapple over its meaning and usefulness in a linguistic contest to see who determines what ethnography means, how it is represented to the world, by whom, and for what purposes. Ethnographers are demanding a say in naming their own discursive terrain, as opposed to having it reductively represented for them by postmodern theory. Postmodern criticism has not been able to name absolutely the ethnographer nor tame the ethnographic tongue, now enunciating anew its own experience in a voice as critical as it is liberatory.

These signs of ethnography's liberatory struggle against the discourse of postmodern theory are evident in the proliferating signs it invents to "say its own world," in dialectic tension with the signs deployed to name and contain it by postmodern theory. In this discursive power struggle between theory and praxis, signification (whether proactive or reactive; accurate or reductive; hyperbolic or resistant; residual, dominant, or emergent) is a key player. The site of struggle is grounded in the rhetorical every bit as much as in the cultural or material.

Adapted to the rigors of new ethical imperatives, the critical ethnographic sign is emerging as a mobile, nomadic, politicized, and self-determining component of a dialectical praxis. Informed by the postmodern critique of

objectivist claims to knowledge, critical ethnography is deploying a host of new signs to enunciate its reconfigured praxis and the repositioning of the ethnographic Self relative to knowledge. Under the self-reflexive signs of “diffraction” and “filter,” critical ethnographers such as Hanson and Brooke and Hogg are acknowledging the deterministic effect of the ethnographic subject in the construction of knowledge. Under the sign of the “dialogic” and the “relational,” critical ethnography is liberating the Self from a self-imposed isolation into a collaborative and transformative solidarity with the Other. Under the signs of the “political” and “cultural action,” it is redefining its goals. Under the sign of the “nomadic,” it is slipping the signifying chains of negative stereotypes such as the Lone Ethnographer. Under the sign of the “rhetorical,” ethnography is expanding its concept of field site beyond the cultural and the material. As evidenced by all these signs, language and experience are converging to produce not only new texts but also new possibilities of lived reality, where the rhetorical, the cultural, and the political are usefully informing and altering one another. This is the protean vision that authorizes critical ethnography, and these are the generative signs with which it seeks to liberate itself into the world, and to bring forth the world from within itself, in a quest to narrow the gap between the possibilities and the realities of democracy.

CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR COMPOSITION STUDIES

As the pieces in this collection evidence, critical ethnography is a resilient discourse with much to contribute to composition studies and to the liberatory struggle for cultural transformation. It has not only weathered the postmodern critique of traditional positivist ethnography, but also is contributing a sophisticated, nuanced, and liberatory critique of its own that has forced a reassessment of postmodern criticism, exposing its contradictions, challenging its assumptions, and identifying its limitations. The liberatory effects of this counter-critique are evidenced in the critical praxis that is emerging: a praxis deeply informed by postmodern theory even as it moves beyond it into new rhetorical and material domains. This praxis privileges goals that are oriented toward liberatory ends, methods that are grounded in collaborative solidarity between ethnographers and participants, and is driven by epistemological and ontological assumptions that foreground the dialectic construction of knowledge, in which the personal and political, the rhetorical and the material, are conjoined. Critical praxis has liberated the ethnographic Self from the debilitating stereotype of the Lone Ethnographer into a free-floating signifier that nomadically occupies many ethnographic subject positions, under many signs, circulating between the dialectical poles of the personal and the social, the rhetorical and the cultural. Additionally, critical ethnography is inventing new

signifying systems to liberate itself not only from the arcane constraints of positivist ethnography, but from the sometimes reductive, occasionally contradictory and often debilitating binds of postmodern theory. As these chapters evince, it is evolving a new ethnographic lexicon under the signs of the “nomadic,” “autoethnography,” “ecoethnography,” “diffraction,” “filter,” “praxis,” and “positionality,” to name but a few. These signs were necessitated by and are adapted to the ethical imperatives of the postpositivist moment.

The decades-long silence of the Other by positivist ethnographic practice has finally been broken, a discursive spell whose passing we should all celebrate, and for the shattering of which we are indebted to postmodern theory. Critical ethnography owes an immeasurable debt to postmodern theory for problematizing positivist practice, for its liberatory effort to humanize, socialize, and politicize ethnographic inquiry, for its ethical resolve to rescue ethnography from the self-serving ends of science, to resituate it within the realm of the political, the cultural, and the rhetorical, to serve not the academic ends of knowledge but the political ends of cultural action. Ethnography cannot but be ennobled by this theoretical and pragmatic transformation of positivist practice into a critical praxis that is more reflexive, collaborative, and transformative, that has transformed a monologic discourse into a dialogic conversation whose ends are social and political. Lacking this active component, ethnography, like all education, devolves into an academic exercise with no impact on or connection to the problematic world beyond the classroom. It is now ready to play its part as a problem-posing, Freirean praxis in the broader liberatory struggle for social transformation and the democratic redistribution of power.

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