New Writers of the Cultural Sage:
The Ethnographic-Self Reconfigured

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A recent body of postmodern scholarship has challenged many of the assumptions, aims, and methods of traditional ethnography. This critique has called into question the validity of ethnographic knowledge by challenging the epistemological and ontological assumptions of scientific objectivism upon which the logical-positivist ethnographic tradition is based. Postmodern theory has demonstrated that claims of scientific objectivity in the knowledge-making industry are as mythical as they are 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: Re-Articulating Labor*, the postmodern critique of traditional ethnography “highlight[s] the partiality and historicity of knowledge and experience” (14). Horner continues: “Knowledge and experience are approached as ‘partial’ in all senses: neither complete, fixed, disinterested, universal, nor neutral, but instead situated, local, interested, material, and historical” (14). Postmodern critics theorize that knowledge is not something that exists definitively, apart from the self, but is negotiated between knowledge-makers, is inseparable from the knowing subject, is not “found” but constructed—thus exploding the myth of subject-object discontinuity. As Parker Palmer avers in *The Courage to Teach*, “We cannot maintain the objectivist gap between the world ‘out there’ and the observer ‘in here’ as posited by pre-modern science. Knower and known are joined, and any claim about the nature of the known reflects the nature of the knower as well” (97). 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. As Sharon Stevens observes, "The old anthropological ideal of definitively describing and fully explaining a studied culture is now considered unobtainable," so thoroughly has the postmodern critique altered our view of culture as a "static system... that can unproblematically be objectified" (166).

To bolster claims of scientific objectivity, the traditional ethnographic self was put under erasure, was treated as if he or she was not "present"—another signifying practice interrogated by postmodern theorists. As Carl Herndl observes after arrival in the field, ethnographers "recede from the following description" and "subsequently suppress the sense of the writer's participation throughout the remainder of the text in order to establish the 'scientific' authority of the 'observation'" (325). The imperative for a more self-reflexive ethnographic self, however, has placed ethnographers in a debilitating bind: how can they signify their own presence without further marginalizing the voice of the Other, whose textual silence has been the source of much criticism? Ethnographers found themselves paralyzed by the seemingly contradictory mandates to foreground the voice of the Other and the ethnographic self. 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, among ethnographers because, as Horner observes, the postmodern critique has placed "an impossible set of responsibilities on the shoulders of the critical ethnographer" (13).

The postmodern critique also interrogated the hierarchical nature of the self-other relationship in traditional ethnographic studies, in which the participant's voice was regularly, if not systematically, subsumed by the ethnographer's, was silenced throughout the research-to-publication process. Consequently, the entire ethnographic project was univocal and hierarchical, foregrounding the interests of the researcher while ignoring those of the participant. As such, ethnographic inquiry unwittingly reinforced negative stereotypes of the exotic Other, who was reduced to an object of study while serving the careerist goals of the active, knowing ethnographic self. Field research often replicated the oppressive effects if not the material conditions of colonization, in which the Other found him or herself not only at the wrong end of a colonial gun but at the short end of an imperial pen.

The self-serving ends, as well as the marginalizing methodologies and the objectivist assumptions of traditional ethnography have also been called into question by postmodern theorists. These ethnographies evidenced little if any concern for transforming the oppressive social
conditions that often existed at the site of inquiry. The material conditions of existence were often omitted from the published narrative, or else their inclusion in thick descriptions was unaccompanied by any concern for their transformation, in an inquiry that privileged "scientific objectivity" over social justice and the acquisition of knowledge over the colonial effects of the knowledge-making apparatus.

As evidenced by this critique, virtually every aspect of traditional ethnographic inquiry has been called into question. Further, a series of seemingly contradictory ethical imperatives placed ethnographers in practical and theoretical binds that called into question ethnography's validity and viability as a research mode, portending its catastrophic closure as an intellectual discourse. As a discursive relic of a colonial era, it was simply a matter of time before the arcane epistemology and largely unexamined aims, assumptions, and methods of traditional ethnography came under critical postmodern scrutiny.

This postmodern critique, as is often the case in discursive power struggles, was nevertheless guilty of theoretical and rhetorical overkill: its own analyses ironically flawed by faulty assumptions, reductive representations, and contradictory imperatives—inadequacies now being exposed by the countercritiques of critical ethnographers. The effects of this postmodern critique on critical ethnography have been as pronounced as they have been ambivalent: if at first it exerted a disabling determinism, its ultimate effects have been enabling, transformative, and protean. I want to theorize various aspects of this discursive power struggle between ethnographic research and the postmodern critique of it: an analysis with broader implications for the dialectical relation between theory and practice in composition studies. This meta-inquiry is shaped by several questions: how, specifically, are critical ethnographers responding to the polemics and imperatives of the postmodern critique? What claims and assertions characterize this countercritique? What are the implications of it for theory and for praxis?

**Beyond Theory Shock: From the Deterministic to the Protean**
The phoenix-like rise of critical ethnography from the ash-heap of this theoretical and practical meltdown speaks not only to the generative self-reflexivity of ethnographic research, but to the enabling dialectic of theory and praxis. If theory's critical gaze can deeply inform praxis, then similarly praxis can expose the contradictions, limitations, and reductive rhetoric of theory, resulting in a more nuanced and sophisticated theoretical apparatus, even as praxis moves beyond the contradictory constraints
of theory into uncharted research topoi, with a critically enriched, self-reflexive, and reconfigured epistemological and ontological apparatus of its own. As Horner asserts, ethnographers are evolving "alternate strategies for responding to the dilemmas these critiques identify" (14). They have abandoned the old goals, assumptions and methods for new ones adapted to the rigorous ethical imperatives of the post-positivist moment—oriented toward the ethical, the social, and the political. Postmodern theorists and ethnographers have rehabilitated the vital dialectic between theory and praxis—and between knowledge and power—in the process revitalizing hopes for altering material conditions and asymmetrical power relations through an emerging solidarity between ethnographer and participant and a protean tension between researcher and theorist.

How ethnographers are reinventing praxis in the wake of this postmodern critique is one of the more interesting, not to say significant, events in recent composition studies, given its implications for pedagogies of cultural change. Galvanized by this postmodern critique, critical ethnographers are discovering new sites for praxis, occupying new theoretical topoi, developing new signifying practices, articulating new ethnographic subjects, redefining their goals, reinventing their methods, and revising their assumptions in what constitutes a radical ontological and epistemological transformation of their praxis. In its emergent, postpositivist incarnation, critical ethnography is personalizing the subject, socializing the process, and politicizing the ends of ethnographic inquiry, while rediscovering its own critical voice with which it is beginning to "talk back" to postmodern theory, to answer the fundamental questions raised by the postmodern interrogation of traditional ethnographic practice:

- What is the role of the ethnographer?
- What is the validity of ethnographic knowledge?
- Can logos and ethos co-exist in the ethnographic field?
- What constitutes a valid ethnographic field site?
- To what extent is the traditional field site being reconfigured to include the rhetorical?
- What goals, methods, and assumptions should define ethnographic praxis?
• How should ethnographers respond to the “crisis of representation” generated by the postmodern interrogation of traditional ethnographic signifying practices?

• What role is signification playing in ethnography’s reinvention of itself?

• How can ethnographers cope with the seemingly irreconcilable imperatives of this critical assault: how, for instance, can they personalize the ethnographic subject without further marginalizing the discourse of the Other? “Is it possible,” as Susan Hanson asks, “to produce a text that is both Self and Other oriented?” (184)

More importantly, how can ethnographers conduct a critical inquiry of the Other without “representing” the Other? How can ethnographers reconcile the seemingly contradictory imperatives to “know” without “representing” the known? As Patricia Sullivan asks in Ethnography and the Problem of the “Other,” “how can we conceive and reflect the ‘other,’ the not us in the process of inquiry, such that we convey otherness in its own terms . . . . How can ethnography survive, Khare asks, ‘if it stops assuming, appropriating, and representing the Other, and lets the Other be itself?’” (97–98).

In the following discussion I hope to answer some of these questions. First, however, I would like to proffer a useful working definition of “critical ethnography”—particularly as it pertains to composition studies. In Ethnography and Composition: Studying Language at Home, Beverly Moss offers a distinction between ethnography and critical ethnography as useful as it is succinct: “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” (156). In Mediating Materiality and Discursivity: Critical Ethnography as Meta-Generic Learning, Mary Jo Reiff endorses this generic distinction:

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.” (44)
In contradistinction to traditional ethnography, which foregrounded the behavior of the Other, critical ethnography focuses on the Other's signifying practices as well, shifting inquiry from the sphere of the corporeal to the realm of the rhetorical. Sullivan provides a more nuanced definition, extending the focus of ethnographic inquiry from the rhetorical to the ethical, observing that “ethnography must be both an accurate account of the literate practices of others and accountable to those others,” a perspective that privileges not just the acquisition, but the effects of knowledge (98). Robert Brooke and Charlotte Hogg proffer an equally useful, if more politically 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. (117)

Brooke and Hogg's definition is useful and significant insofar as it foregrounds the liberatory ends of ethnographic inquiry in the postpositivist moment.

We gain an even deeper understanding of critical ethnography through an appreciation of its origins, which are partially rooted in the theories and field work of Paulo Freire, “and moves through Ira Shor and Henry Giroux in contemporary American education” (116). In other words, critical ethnography privileges a dialectical relationship between the critical word and the political world—a dialectic that it seeks to regenerate, operating from an assumed faith in the procreative power of any dialectic. This is where Giroux's theories on the dialectic between education and culture, between critical inquiry and cultural transformation (particularly as enunciated in Theory and Resistance in Education), prove their relevance. 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 action appropriate to that location” (116). Building on this Freirean tradition, scholars like Horner are theorizing critical ethnography under the sign of
“labor” and “work” in order to emphasize the intrinsically social and collaborative nature of it.

The ethical, political, and social turns in critical ethnography derive not only from Freirean praxis, but from feminist discourse 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). Feminist concerns with agency, with the ethics of representation, with the emancipatory ends of research (“for women rather than on women”), and with the “multiple and shifting subject positions we inhabit,” anticipate the concerns that prompted the postmodern critique of traditional ethnography (xxi). The questions that define this critique are rooted in feminist discourse as well: “Who benefits from the research? Whose interests are at stake? What are the consequences for participants?” Mortensen and Kirsch continue:

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

As Lance Massey asserts, “It has been this infusion of feminist pragmatism, moreover, that has enabled ‘postmodern’ ethnography to become ‘critical’ ethnography”—evolving a praxis that foregrounds ethos, while avoiding the theoretical binds of ethical imperatives (274).

Drawing on the diverse discourses of postcolonialism, feminism, Freirean liberatory praxis, and radical pedagogy, critical ethnography is synthesizing the antithetical tensions of the theoretical and the practical, the personal and the political, the material and the rhetorical. Further, it is selectively contesting the claims of postmodern critics, dialectically recuperating its own authority. 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 14).

New methods, goals, and assumptions require a new language. Consequently, critical ethnographers are adopting new signifying prac-
Ethnography has undergone a discursive diaspora. It now flourishes under the sign of the "self-reflexive," the "dialogic," the "multi-vocal," and the "nomadic." Its protean 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 self-fashioning. There has always been an element of mobility associated with ethnography given the necessity of remote field sites. Now ethnographers are 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.

Ethnography in this postpositivist moment is foregrounding ethos in both the making of knowledge and the ends it serves, which inevitably involve the democratic redistribution of power through culture. Concomitantly, it is waging its own liberation struggle against the reductive determinants of theory, as it takes possession of a new ethnographic self that is in fact not one, but many selves: not a unified, fixed, autonomous, and disinterested self, but a multiple, nomadic, dialogic, and situated subject whose inquiries are dispersed across a range of field sites. As efficacious as these critical adjustments in assumptions, methods, and goals have been, critical ethnography's countercritique of the postmodern polemic has had perhaps the most liberatory effect on praxis.

**Sign/Counter Sign: The Myth of the Lone Ethnographer**

The response of critical ethnographers to the criticisms of postmodern theorists evidences the tendency of discourse to be always and forever dialectical instead of absolutely univocal. The interplay of positivist ethnography, the postmodern critique of it, and critical ethnography evinces the perpetual dialectic of residual, 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 enervated by it. This protean tension 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 resourceful-
ness of its countercriticisms of postmodern theory. This countercriticism has finally contained the postmodern critique not only by assimilating its valid ideas, but by exposing its contradictions, reductive representations, and rhetorical overkill—in the process facilitating its own liberatory break-out into new linguistic and research topoi. In this post-positivist moment, critical ethnography is beginning “to contest” some of the claims and assumptions that inform the postmodern critique. As evidenced by the emerging arguments of its practitioners, it is rediscovering its own critical voice in dialectical engagement with the polemical imperatives of postmodern discourse.

In the forefront of this countercritique are theorists like 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.” As Horner observes,

In Renato Rosaldo’s satiric depiction, the Lone Ethnographer produces his ethnography as a result of a quest that seems to be self-defined ... not the result of any set of social or historical circumstances. ... The work produced is imagined to be the researcher’s own. ... Rosato’s Lone Ethnographer is “lone,” makes “his” quest to find “his” native, makes his trip alone and apparently by his own means and writes his “true account” all by himself and for himself and others like him. (15)

Sharon Stevens provides a succinct overview of Rosaldo’s Lone Ethnographer “who travels to ‘a distant land’ to do field work, undergoing heroic trials before finally returning home to write a ‘definitive work’ under a ‘mask of innocence,’ never recognizing his complicity with imperialism.” Stevens continues, “The Lone Ethnographer never acknowledges the full system of relationships and connections that his work establishes between him, his audience back home, and the ‘natives’ he writes about, let alone the power differentials inherent in those relationships” (166). Horner similarly problematizes this myth of the ethnographic Lone Ranger, noting that “the materiality of ethnographic work ... is ignored ... imagined as strictly ‘the product of the Lone Ethnographer’s labors’”:

Omitted from this narrative is the role of particular social and material conditions (e.g. ... funding agencies, informants, libraries, clerical support, academic departments, journals, research assistants, university presses and the editors who work for them). The contributions of these to the work produced is largely dismissed. ... The value of the work, located
in the textual product, is attributed not to the labor of all these participants but to the features of the text itself as a commodity. (15)

As the countercritiques of Horner and Stevens evince, critical ethnography is beginning "to contest this traditional ideal vision of ethnographic work," recognizing "the contributions of others in addition to the ‘Lone Ethnographer’ to the work produced" (Horner 15). The result is a far more nuanced perception of the ethnographic self than the stereotypic image of the "Lone Ethnographer" operating in a social and historical vacuum.

In contradistinction to the claims of postmodern critics, Homer asserts that all ethnography is collaborative in nature, particularly when viewed from a cultural materialist perspective. Ethnography, Homer avers, is no different than 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. Homer theorizes "critical ethnographic work in terms of labor, in the sense of material practices aimed at altering the physical and social environment" (21). 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 of ethnographic inquiry. Throughout this knowledge-making process, meaning is made dialectically, through dialogue with others; it is less univocal than "multivocal."

Homer’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 be held to the same ethical imperatives as the researcher? Are the representations of postmodern critics as guilty of reinforcing negative stereotypes as the signifying practices of the positivist ethnographer they criticize? Reductive representations like 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." Those who live by the signifying sword must sometimes perish by it. By exploding the myth of the "lone ethnographer" and exposing the
underlying contradictions of the postmodern critique, Horner provides a more nuanced view of the ethnographic self.

Countercritiques like Horner's are enabling critical ethnographers to evolve 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, and particularly through a more nuanced criticism of itself. Theoretical counterpunches like Horner's mitigate the effects of the postmodern attack on ethnography: instead of being deterministic and disabling, that influence is proving to be dialectical and protean. 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.

Horner elaborates a more nuanced ethnographic self as a result of criticism aimed not only at the reductive representations of the "Lone Ethnographer" but at the idealized notions of the "field collaborator" posited by critical ethnography itself. His self-reflexive analysis of the collaborative ethnographic self facilitates the recuperation of ethnographic authority, insofar as it articulates a more nuanced problematic of the "collaborative ideal" (18). As Horner observes, the collaborative ideal is problematized by the material conditions of inquiry: participants "may in fact have little or no interest in ethnographic research," lack the necessary time or means to write, or have notions of writing that collide with those of the researcher—or they may simply decline the invitation to "participate" in the production of research texts (18). Further, the "multivocality" of the collaboration inevitably alters the genre (the text of the finished research), altering as well its reception by editors, readers, and colleagues, conditioned by the textual norms of traditional ethnographic signifying practices. As Ralph Cintron observes, "The audience for writing research imposes on researchers a normative discourse that lacks elasticity" (401). Consequently, readers of ethnography, as Minzhan Lu asserts,

need to examine the politics of textual reception... and the ways they intend to and actually use the knowledge they produce from their reading. We readers need to treat our own preferences for certain ethical turns—meanings as well as forms—as contingent and situated rather than as a set of autonomous and universal laws for ranking the ethical decisions of individual researchers. (285)
This too problematizes the collaborative ideal, whose dialogic methodology may be compromised by the generic constraints of textual reception, which privilege univocal texts. Nuanced critiques such as Horner’s and Lu’s suggest that as a postmodern signified, the Ethnographic self floats somewhere between the reductive and idealized signs of the “Lone Ethnographer” and the research collaborator respectively posited by traditional and critical ethnographers. It is, moreover, a critique that by virtue of its double-sheathed nuances recuperates ethnographic authority, putting to rest perhaps the most critical question raised by ethnographers and critics alike, contained in the subtitle of Cintron’s aforementioned article: “Can Writing Researchers Do Ethnography in a Postmodern Era?” Critiques like Horner’s indicate that critical ethnographers are evolving a radical postmodern episteme whose critical self-reflexivity is inspired by a postmodern critique, the reductive limitations and binding imperatives of which it is moving beyond. The invention of a radical, postpositivist episteme, however, commences 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. Consequently, the study of the Other is only justified if it is conducted in solidarity with the Other and yoked to the transformation of oppressive material conditions—and this constitutes the solution to the “crisis of representation.” Further, it is in this context that the theories and praxis of Freire evidence their relevance to critical ethnographers.

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 then 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. As Bronwyn Williams and Mary Brydon-Miller assert, critical ethnographers need to “become engaged in efforts to challenge social inequality and economic disparity
as they affect our classrooms and communities” (254). Ethnographic inquiry should be energized by a spirit of community activism. Its goal, as Brooke and Hogg argue, should be the development of “critical action” (116). As Stevens asserts, the critical ethnographer seeks ways to link ethnographic knowledge-making to political struggle, to position him or herself “within the complex of relations that constitute the cultural logics,” as part of an inquiry that foregrounds “analysis of cultural logics” in an effort to “craft a more ethical and self-aware ethnographic authority” (164, 168). John Lofty endorses this political orientation, asserting that critical ethnographers are “researchers for change” who “explore key themes of power, resistance, identity politics and liberation” (133). Gwen Gorzelsky similarly asserts that critical ethnography is concerned with “cultivating systematic change” (74).

As evidenced by this recent body of scholarship, the focus of ethnographic outcomes has shifted from the career of the ethnographer to the material conditions that determine the lived reality of the participant. Further, participants are engaged as active subjects in this political struggle instead of being treated as static objects to be studied. 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—our selves” (95). Gorzelsky’s innovative analysis of figuration in critical ethnography reveals the efficacy of signification in general and of metaphor in particular in capturing the sense of this paradigmatic shift in the goals of ethnographic inquiry. As Gorzelsky observes, “This revision involves seeing myself not as an acolyte (a source of demystification) or revolutionary vanguardist (a kind of missionary) but as a small spring” (94). Gorzelsky’s trope of the “small spring” reinscribes the figurative signs of the Te-Tao Ching, which “emphasize changes that begin as small initiatory moves and grow in size and strength as they merge with comparable energies” (94). This significant reconfiguration of ethnographic goals has been accompanied by an equally important transformation of the ethnographic process.

Toward Radical Reciprocity: Dialogic Pragmatism in “The Field”

Responding to the ethical imperatives of criticism that have raised a host of “meta-methodological” issues, critical ethnographers are reinventing praxis (Massey 271). Their adjustments to criticism are altering the dynamics of the observer/participant relationship, 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 co-investigators, evidencing a commitment to enact a dialogic encounter between researchers and subjects” (Gorzelsky 95).

This new critical praxis is grounded in social solidarity with the Other. 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. This is where critical ethnography derives its ethical mandate—is where praxis, logos, and ethos converge. As Horner observes, ethnographers are responding to the “call for re-imagining research practice as ‘praxis,’ responsive to the local research site” (14). This reconfigured praxis reflects the influence not just of postmodern criticism, but of feminist pragmatism and its “ethic of care” (see Massey 275). 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 (275). Horner writes: “the Other can now speak in the text,” can write collaboratively with the observer, who has broken away from the “univocality of the research text” (23). If its methods are characterized by this “dialogic process,” its goals are similarly to be achieved through “collaborative cultural action” (Brooke and Hogg 118).

This concern with yoking research to cultural action not only reinscribes Freirean praxis but is reflected in the signifying practices with which critical ethnographers are defining their praxis, as evidenced by such descriptions as “Participant-Action Research” (Williams, Brydon-Miller). The construction of knowledge is not only assumed to be “relational,” but its outcomes political. Inquiry is not theorized and practiced as an act of possession, but as an act of reciprocal interpretation insofar as ethnographic inquiry is doubly-sheathed in the experiences of the ethnographer and the participant, which are brought into dialectical contact in this knowledge-making process. As Kristie Fleckenstein observes, “Knowledge of the world and the self, as Morris Berman explains, results when a ‘not self’ and a ‘self’ permeate each other” (296). The traditional self-other binary dissolves into a self-other continuum which results in a “positioned awareness” and a “revised sense of self—one that recognizes the self as part of its environment and structured by that environment” (Gorzelsky 87). This reconfiguration of the self-other
dynamic has led to a “new organization of the self in the field” (Wheeler, qtd. in Gorzelsky 92).

Further, this reconfigured theoretical framework validates a project-oriented praxis as a useful vehicle for ethnographic inquiry, as evidenced in the work of critical ethnographers like Brooke and Hogg. Community-based projects privilege a methodology grounded in cooperation between participants and observer in the social construction of knowledge. In this reinscription of Freirean praxis, participants are engaged as collaborators and co-investigators 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, bringing classroom and community into dialectical contact. This “place-conscious” ethnography has obvious implications and applications for the emerging discourse of eco-ethnography, “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 (Brook and Hogg 125). As evidenced by recent inquiries, the concept of a “field site” as well as the methodologies practiced in the field, are being radically altered by critical ethnographers to meet the imperatives of postmodern theory.

Reconfiguring the Ethnographic Self: “Nomadic Consciousness”

Critical ethnography is responding to this crisis of representation not only by politicizing its goals and by socializing its methods, but 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 reflexivity to adopt, and to what purpose” (Stevens 157). The immediate effect of this criticism has been an abundance of narratives foregrounding the personal experience of the ethnographer: a sort of narratological land-rush in which ethnographers have jumped aboard this bandwagon of the personal. This in turn has led to the additional, if somewhat contradictory, criticism that ethnography has become too narcissistic in its self-reflexivity. By over-reacting to criticism, critical ethnography 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 compounded the absence of the Other. Criticism has
thus placed critical ethnographers in a debilitating bind, creating a crisis of representation with which they are struggling to cope. 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: trapped between an ethnographic “rock” and a theoretical “hard place.” Where do we turn and what do we do to escape this double-bind?

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. Stevens, 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” (168). Countercritiques like Stevens’ free 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.

Critical ethnographers are also 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, “thereby acknowledging that position affects perspective” and that ethnographic claims to authority are “rhetorically constructed” (Stevens 167, 157). Ethnographic inquiry is now seen as an “interpretive” act, even as the ethnographer is seen as a “filter” through which the field site emerges. Renouncing the positivist stance of the ethnographer as an objective determiner of knowledge, researchers are instead situating 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 representational practices” (Stevens 166). This is evidenced by the turn away from the objective and toward the subjective in general, and by the proliferation of “arrival stories” and “auto-ethnographies” in particular. Critical ethnographers are converting a false absence into an explicit presence under the sign of the personal, the subjective, and the auto-ethnographic. Auto-ethnography is expanding the terrain of ethnography from the cultural and the political to the experiential and the rhetorical. As Reiff asserts, ethnographic inquiries into the genres privileged by participants and ethnographers alike are “bring[ing] into play the dialectical relationship between the material and the symbolic.” Reiff continues:
If ... genres are the rhetorical manifestations or maps of a community's actions, then genre analysis becomes a critical component of ethnography, [revealing] a community's social motives and actions [by analyzing] the rhetorical manifestations of these actions [and] the rhetorical patterns they reveal about the community . . . the group's values, beliefs and ideologies. Ethnography then functions as a "metagene," as both a genre (a research narrative) and a mode of genre analysis—a research methodology used to grasp cultural beliefs and behaviors. . . . (41)

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 sign of "rhetorical ethnography," "cultural materialist ethnography," "auto-ethnography," "participant-action research," "community-based, project-oriented ethnography," "eco-ethnography"—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 ethnographic writing and the "lived experience" of its participants, including the experience of the ethnographer (Reiff 39). Favoring what Fred Myers calls a "politics of location" (qtd. in Stevens 169), it constructs knowledges not as ends in themselves but as means to "social actions" motivated by a Freirean desire to "create more authentic contexts for learning" (Reiff 41).

Further, this tendency to foreground the explicit presence of the ethnographer (on both the experiential and the rhetorical level) 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 absence 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 tending toward political solidarity with the Other, "without concealing what [ethnographers] learn about themselves in the process" (Hanson 184). 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 (184). This reconfigured, ethnographic self is a researching subject sensitive to the cultural, political, and rhetorical contexts that constitute the lived reality of participants, even as it is committed to altering the material conditions that oppress participants. Further, as the recent work of critical ethnographers evidences, the ethnographic self is not fixed and unitary but multiple and nomadic, proliferating across a continuum of research sites, occupying a broad spectrum of subject positions, manifesting what Juan Guerra characterizes as a "nomadic consciousness." In contradistinction to the reductive sign of the "Lone Ethnographer," critical ethnographers are representing the ethnographic self across a complex continuum of subject positions.

Ethnographers' ability to signify the ethnographic self not as one but as many is but one of the signifying strategies by which it is recuperating authority. It is, moreover, a strategy similar to that adopted by the Other when confronted by the reductive signifying practices of the dominant culture. In the grasp of an essentializing postmodern discourse, ethnography has proven itself too slippery to be contained under reductive signs like the "Lone Ethnographer." What is emerging is an enriched sense of the ethnographic self—which is not one but many selves, which is not freestanding but embodied in and embodying the Other, which is not concerned with the acquisition of knowledge as an end in itself, but as the means to a more authentic self for both itself and the Other.

**Critical Praxis into Cultural Power**

Ethnographic research, informed by postmodern theoretical imperatives that privilege the ethical, the social and the political, and enriched by its own critical self-reflexivity, is heading in bold new directions—is moving toward a more "ethical, self-aware ethnographic authority" (Stevens 168). 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. While deeply indebted to postmodern theory for problematizing positivist practice, for humaniz-
ing, socializing, and politicizing ethnographic inquiry, for rescuing ethnography from the self-serving ends of objectivist science and re-situating it within the realm of the political and the rhetorical, critical ethnography is nonetheless moving beyond the debilitating constraints of theory into a new critical praxis that is collaborative, self-reflexive, and transformative. From urban schools in Britain to rural communities in Nebraska, from the signifying practices of stake-holders in the eco-wars 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. Critical ethnography is finally emerging from the "theoretical anxiety" (or theory shock) of the postmodern critique, enabled by the contradictory imperatives and theoretical double binds by which it was initially disabled.

Let me return to one of the questions that framed this inquiry: what end should ethnographic knowledge serve? "The ultimate purpose of critique," as Giroux asserts, should be "critical thinking in the interest of social change" (18). The efficacy of enough "small springs" bubbling with resistance is the "development of a collective critical consciousness and sensibility that would embrace a discourse of opposition . . . as a precondition of human freedom":

a form of knowledge that [enables] the oppressed . . . to appropriate the most progressive dimensions of their own cultural histories [and which would] provide a motivational connection to action itself. It would have to link a radical decoding of history to a vision of the future that not only exploded the reifications of existing society, but also reached into those pockets of desires and needs that harbored a longing for a new society and new forms of social relations. (Giroux 27, 35)

Lacking a more meaningful engagement with the real, particularly at the site of inquiry, ethnography, like all education, devolves into a mere academic exercise with no impact upon or connection to the problematic world beyond the classroom. Informed by the rich traditions of feminism, postcolonialism, and Freirean praxis, critical ethnography has the potential to energize a heteroglossia of resistant discourses engaged in the liberatory struggle for cultural transformation and for the democratic redistribution of power. If enough "small springs" of inquiry bubble up, the knowledge they make can make a difference—not only across boundaries of race, class, and gender, but across boundaries of disciplines and cultures.
So let us use what we use best, the rhetorical, to transform the material. Let us use the word to alter the world. Let us find ways to make analysis of lived reality in general, and of undemocratic concentrations of power in particular, a focus of critical inquiry—not as an end in itself, but as a precondition for the transformation of that reality through the redistribution of power. This is the work that cries out for workers, the long labor that can ennoble us all. "The work of the world is," as Marge Piercy reminds us, “common as mud . . . and the thing worth doing . . . has a shape that satisfies. . . . The pitcher cries for water to carry and a person for work that is real."

Make it real—for by making it real, we make it matter.

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Notes

1. This essay is a revised and expanded version of a chapter, "Beyond Theory Shock: Ethos, Knowledge, and Power in Critical Ethnography," which appears in Brown and Dobrin.

Works Cited


