

In Defense of the Sensual: Meaning Construction in Ethnography and Poetics

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Lack of closure in ethnography is less a problem of unknowables than plural "know-abilities" and the frustrations of choosing among them. Human beings are sensual and intellectual creatures who experience the world through that combination and whose corporeal existences are appropriated and molded by culture—the system of signs and meanings that defines for us the nature of the world and our place in it. Carving science or poetry out of this "made" universe requires heightened sensitivity to its properties. Yet mostly, only poets write about experience consistently from a sensual perspective. Poetry is another way to encode and share the foundations of such experience; poetry can ground theories of the world that actually involve our interactions with it, not just abstractions from it. Thus, a more robust entrance point for modern ethnography may be best centered on some combination of humanistic and scientific design as artful-science, not on either extreme.

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Our own body is in the world as the heart is in the organism: it keeps the visible spectacle constantly alive, it breathes life into it and sustains it inwardly, and with it forms a system.

—M. Merleau-Ponty (1962)

Sensuous scholarship is ultimately a mixing of head and heart. It is an opening of one's being to the world—a welcoming. Such embodied hospitality is the secret of the great scholars, painters, poets, and filmmakers whose images and words resensualize us.

—P. Stoller (1997)

For many years, logical positivism and an emphasis on quantitative methods contained and channeled the nature of my research. Ultimately, my personal inclination to follow philosophical questions and research topics

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wherever they went—across cultural and disciplinary boundaries, in whatever language was appropriate to the task—created a conflict with those constraints. Positivism began to look increasingly like a list of things that could not be studied successfully, or at all, because of bad controls over the subject matter: it was too elusive for behavioral groundings (minds in black boxes, emotions); it would not yield to positivist reductions without great distortions (ordinary reality, dialogic constructions of meaning); replication for comparative purposes was impossible or impractical (views of the nature of the world and our place in it); it could not be tied in any causal way to the material forces at work in provisioning society (poetry); or the problem was such that “unscientific” disciplines already had a claim on it (English, art, music, theater, etc.), making it too “soft” for hard-minded methods and inquiry. No science there; better to leave those domains alone if one expects to succeed and to be rewarded for rigor in research (the discovery and reporting modes that are usually set with great rigor by funding agencies). But my circumstances have changed. Without abandoning the old anthropological subject matter of humans studying other humans in their particulars and their totalities, I have veered from the positivist trail in an effort to find new ways to do some of the old things, new ways to do new things, and to assess the value of old ways for doing some of the new things. The result is what I have called *artful-science* (see Brady, 1990, 1991a, 1998, 2000, 2003).

The grip of the old paradigms loosened for me through exposure to the realities of fieldwork on small islands in the Pacific; the intellectual challenges of postmodernism; increasing innovations and praxis in qualitative methods; an increasing awareness of “self” developed through the study of phenomenology, linguistics, and poetry; the embedded role of the observer in research, complete with tantalizing cross-cultural mysteries (how we “see” and construct each other in dialogue); and an increasing frustration with the distortions required to cram burgeoning self-conscious knowledge about ordinary realities in a richly semiotic world into the preconceived categories of positivist research. I suspected then what I now know emphatically: no science is an island; all disciplines are connected to the robust study of being human; privileged observation has its merits, but no monopoly on Truth, irrespective of discipline; the productive power of language makes meaning unlimited;¹ responsible social science has to reject (as unnecessarily incomplete, among other problems) dogmatic empiricism that forecloses on the study of meaning and subjective communication in favor of an exclusive focus on behavior; arguments based on mind-body separations are unrealistic; Truth is as much

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a matter of agreeable conversation as it is demonstrable pattern in the world (see Rorty, 1979; cf. Eagleton, 1996); and a real discovery that is fundamental to the argument at hand, poets are people too—sentient beings in a sensual world who know it and write about it in ways that can teach all of us something important both as individuals and as members of the human collective.

Drawing on that, we can proceed to some key organizing questions: As ethnographers, what do we try to study? How? For what purposes? Let us start with formation of the observer as a sentient and semiotic creature, compelled to make sense of his or her universe, dedicated to doing so on his or her own terms, with his or her own cultural programming, his or her own *gestalts* and deeper senses of purpose on the planet. Or phrased differently, we might ask, Where do ethnographers come from? Answer: The same places as the rest of us (including poets), through the same formative processes as human beings, anchored in the same heavily constructed, self-defining, cultural fields that yield in their order and semiotic sense for us what—because of its cultural constructions on the sentient field of being and becoming human—can be called the *Made World*. All claims to privilege in argument about the nature of the world must start here, in this common grounding, in the mix of culture and biology.

MEANING CONSTRUCTION IN THE BIOCULTURAL ORGANISM

Human beings are sensual and intellectual creatures and they experience the world through that combination, although not apparently in anything approaching equal measures of the biological and cultural. That is an old bugaboo and no one really knows how to measure the mix of “nature” and “nurture.” But we do know that the mix is there as a feature of “being,” that human nature is nested in the soma and thus in the sensuous, and that our corporeal existence is appropriated and molded by culture. So the conscious semiotic world is not given in any direct way by the senses, as might be said in part for the physicality of a pain, the feel of a rock, the smell of a tree, or the taste of a drink of water. The world of signs and meanings is *made*. And in its making it appropriates all else, *everything*, including things given to the senses, such as pains, rocks, trees, and water. Meaning is made in that way, not found, and in its making it gets anchored in what *appeals* to the senses, the sensual, including bodies themselves. Meaning is body centered, anchored *in* the senses, and frequently *about* body conditions—a measure of how we are at any given moment, a platform for interpreting the “stuff” of our lives, from the simple act of digging up a sweet potato, nursing a baby, or seating oneself in a chair, to the launching of rockets to the moon.

We can say in this context that the Made World consists of everything created by hand or mind in human society, from buildings to bad ideas, kinship

systems to concrete walls, language to culture, and back again. For those who enter it as newborn or stranger, that world must be decoded, learned, reinterpreted to be known. It is appropriated mentally—and therefore “meaning-full”—but the results are not available equally as information or specific interpretations to all the beings on the planet who could (and would) “make sense” (including “non-sense”) of them given the opportunity. Culture is the system of signs and meanings that defines for us (each of us, all of us) the nature of the world and our place in it, and its individuations separate us. As meanings are made, sensuous and intellectual experiences are catalogued, by different namers, different beings, and the world of signs and meanings gets cluttered, calculated, coded, partialized, hidden from some, and manifested in daily life to others in the process.² The result is a social setting structured deeply by socialization, enculturation, and individual experiences in which some messages are bound to be unclear, confusing, and contradictory, whereas others appear to define precisely for us what the world is about through widely known and shared codes.

When pushed through new linguistic and imagistic experiences, that same body-centered system gives us unlimited meaning-making opportunities, weighed through our existing repertoires of information, verbal and nonverbal, as stored in our cognitive and emotional memory banks. The constructive process of analyzing, comparing, conjecturing, and inferring facts about the nature of the world makes life polysemous, polyvocal, ripe for alternative interpretations even as it guarantees a lack of closure in any absolute sense. It gives us ambiguous and competing truths, including mixtures of what we may decide is fact or fiction—things that must be true, things that may not be true, things that are deliberately contrived as not true in the primary reality framework we apply to our experiences but which may “ring true” to patterns of life as we know them (see Brady, 2003; V. Turner, 1967). Blessed (or cursed) with this “conjectural” mentality, linked indelibly to some kind of reconciliation with what we already know, or think we know, we fill in gaps of information, infer at least the “truth of what is happening,” in attempts to locate and communicate meaning through the clutter of signs that constitute the world around us. The process is always selective and ongoing and for that reason, incomplete. But internalizing these domains in their cultural particulars is necessary for comprehending a new environment. As children, we absorb and accept this process as “natural.” As self-conscious beings of any age we launch our interpretations from the same kinds of biocultural platforms but sometimes choose semiotic pathways through the experience that will reflect only the truth we *want* to find—for science, for pleasure, for simply deciding what is going on and moving from one thing to the next.

This is the universe of, in, and through which we make meaning; the nature of the environment in which we learn, think, share, emulate, communicate, and otherwise act as culturally saturated, sentient individuals. Making science or poetry out of it requires heightened sensitivity to its properties.³

But that is where the similarities start to erode, especially when we travel and study as self-conscious ethnographers.

Getting From One Place to Another

Cross-cultural relations are always mutually structured in their inception as an Other-Other dyad. Each society looks from the inside out at an extension of what is clearly defined as Not-Us. Meshing with a cross-culturally Made World adds to the possibilities of clutter in the culture pool. Poet or not, ethnographer or not, the cultural landscape is made thicker, less accessible, more puzzling by cross-cultural experience. There is more to know, less that is apprehended easily, and getting through that satisfactorily is never a simple process. Every tourist knows that just getting across that original divide of stranger to stranger can be a bumpy ride, in part because every society has its own cultural determinations of what is Own and Other to its members, *within* its own cultural boundaries, and in part because each group will take action to protect the integrity of those meaning-laden domains.⁴ Others are constructed in our experience through the concepts of Otherness we learn from our Own cultures, and even that can vary from one individual to the next (based on cross-cultural knowledge, familiarity with thoughts and behaviors less familiar to others in one's Own culture, and the like). But because we are largely unconscious of the extent of our own Made Worlds, we generally have no idea where the boundaries start to cross, where they really begin. Only the perceived exaggerations of difference stand out on first exposure to Not-Us. No authentic or precise Own/Other distinction is given to us starkly, cleanly, at its inception. These structures are often crossed blindly and sometimes brought to mind only when they hit the hew and cry of transgression, when the signal goes up because single-mindedness or indifference has gone too far into places where its foundations and appearances have no roots—the classic cross-cultural miscue. So rubbed (or enlightened), we discover that not all concepts, terms, beliefs, or methods travel equally well. We can attempt to reconcile the differences in these otherwise unmixed (and perhaps seemingly unmixable) cultural products in relation to each other—a primary goal of understanding if not civil responsibility in ethnographic projects—but we merely make an empty vow if we promise to eliminate our own basic foundations in the process, if we promise to become the perfectly detached observer or assume that cross-cultural “facts” transport undistorted through our objectivities of method. That runs afoul of the roughly unassailable propositions that context is practically everything for determining meaning, that we are indelibly imprinted by our natal cultures, and that we can learn new things only in terms of what we already know.⁵

These complexities notwithstanding, and recognizing the perils of dogmatic impositions on research and of ethnocentrism in general, humanistic

ethnography aspires to see things as much as possible from “the native’s point of view” (see Geertz, 1983). That is an important avenue for poetic entry into the subject and the high road to a daunting package of difficulties. Humanistically oriented ethnographers and linguists know full well going into such situations that the work will be muddled and cluttered, that words refer to concepts of things, not to the “things themselves,” that all meaningful expressions are contextualized by tacit information and cultural presuppositions which the producers themselves may not be aware of—that for these reasons and others, we can never see the world exactly or completely from the Other’s point of view, that we can never *be* “the thing—the Other—in itself.” So “going native” is not, in the final analysis, a possibility, except in the somewhat narrow sense of trading in a dogmatically selfish viewpoint for one that gives us more receptiveness to the Other. In any case, we must at least *try* to bridge the cross-cultural gap from our original mindset to Others or we shall be condemned forever (as the slogans have it) to the distortions of describing baseball games with cricket jargon, of trying to find our way around Cambridge, Massachusetts, with a map of Cambridge, England—of never having the right tools for the job. The scientific paradigm that imposes its own categories exclusively as ways of sorting the ordinary realities of Others misses important semiotic and conceptual collisions of meaning and therefore increases the risk of exaggerating and distorting the empirical reality of its ethnographic research. Humanistic immersions have a better chance of capturing the emics of Others through participation at ground level, but they put the more distanced realm of comparative frameworks (including those of arch-positivism) at risk in the process by swamping the process with particulars. Each of these orientations does work the other cannot. Choices between them must be governed by the situation at hand—the problems to be studied, the need for general comparative work, the richness and accuracy of particulars required, and so on.

All ethnographic work is necessarily comparative at the level of Self/Other (see Middleton, 1998). The social construction of reality guarantees that at a minimum. I see you, you see me, we construct ourselves together in mutual communication on terms set largely by our cultural orientations. But as we know from the battles of postmodern debates (and have rehearsed it to some degree already here), how that experience gets remade in its representations as science or something more poetic in constitution is another matter. An intuitive grasp of the differences is commonplace. Everybody knows that scientific writing differs from poetry in fundamental ways, that it is more clinical and less given to uncommon metaphors than poetry, and so on. But an important theoretical implication that often goes unappreciated in these discussions is that each form technically plays a different language game: The positivists use language that is supposed to be transparent or invisible; the humanists (most pointedly the poets) do exactly the opposite—they openly display their presence as observers and authors in their works. More than just

a difference of "style," each mode of representation thereby has different criteria for deciding on acceptable or satisfactory forms of expression, and the implications of that are enormous. Changing the language of our descriptions, as Wittgenstein (1974) said, also changes the analytic game itself, including changing the premises for research entry points.

What Happens to Ethnography When We Send in the Poets?

As meaning makers we are also meaning-seeking creatures, compelled to "make sense" of our experience. But it is mostly only the poets (and some old-school phenomenologists, such as Merleau-Ponty, 1962) who write about experience consistently from a sensual perspective—centering, decoding, reframing, discovering, and discoursing the clutter of the Made World, literally as "embodied" participants and observers, full of touch, smell, taste, hearing, and vision, open to the buzz and the joy and the sweat and the tears—the erotics—of daily life, hoping to reveal that world for what it is, as it is experienced reflexively and self-consciously in its patterns and its puzzles, as it can be shared with coparticipants, with Others, by drawing on their common humanity, through the rules and screens of culture. That kind of reporting, of course, has traditionally been labeled "literary," and the social sciences are not immune to it.⁶

The "literary turn" in the social sciences (see Brady, 1998; Denzin 1997; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) leads logically to the strongest possible focus on writing, even to obsession with lines, punctuation, and white spaces—in a word, to poetry. As "an increasingly public way" to encode, encapsulate, and convey ethnographic experience (see Hymes, 2001), poetry opens up ethnographic inquiry to the whole realm of aesthetics and to what appears to be, from the perspective of the received wisdom, a truckload of counter-intuitive arguments about ethnographic representation—"incommensurate" items, things that do not seem to "compare on the same level," do not "go together," such as the apparent intrusion of first-person writing as a violation of author visibility or "writer consciousness" in scientific reports. Poetic writing is conspicuous. It flags itself in place, maximizing its focus on signifiers over the signified—Jakobson's (1987, p. 69) "poetic" function; it is experimental, consciously manipulating semiotica in speech and writing for meaningful effects in an effort to say new things, old things in new ways, special things about Being-in-the-World. The language of science adds more construction constraints and some of its own fictions, including the "window of objectivity."⁷ It wants to do anything but flag itself (unless it is jargon) in place. It maximizes its focus on signifieds, not signifiers. Poetry puts a semiotic smudge on that window, offers no free vision, shows itself as method, and plays with metaphor.

We use metaphor as a tool of and for discovery. Said simply, metaphor is explaining something in terms of something else (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Lakoff & Turner, 1989). Its construction is inherently creative and fundamental to human thought (see Deacon, 1997; Pinker, 1999; M. Turner, 1996). Easy to locate in poetry, its use extends as well to scientific thinking and writing, although we tend not to think of it in those terms.⁸ "The poet and the scientist alike use metaphor to extrapolate a suspected inner connection among things. Metaphors are slices of truth; they are evidence of the human ability to see the universe as a coherent organism" (Danesi, 1999, p. 111; see also Banville, 1998; Hoffmann, 2003; Montgomery, 1996). There is no human life or language without them. It follows, as poet/ethnographer/linguist Dennis Tedlock (1999) asserts, that "every act of speech or writing has a poetic dimension. This applies to discourse among ethnographic others, dialogues between others and ethnographers, and ethnographic speaking and writing" (p. 155). Moreover, calling further attention to the lack of transparency in language and the mutuality of our engagements in fieldwork, Tedlock notes that "the dialogical potential of language is used to balance each representation with an alternative representation, producing poetry that is built on a process of translation rather than made to resist translation" (p. 155; see also Moring, 2001; M. Turner, 1996).

So the first principle of scientific ethnography, a comparative framework, is not lost in poetic expression (fiction, poetry as verse or prose, etc.).⁹ The mutual constructions of dialogic discourse and the inherent and universal properties of metaphoric communication create a comparative framework by definition. Metaphorizing experience is an activity embedded in interpersonal relations and thereby rendered more or less consciously in the realms of sociability and the social construction of reality—person to person, author to reader, and so on, every waking day. Poets bring it to mind deliberately and make a self-conscious project out of it, bending (or abandoning completely) the rules of conventional research, intent on exploring the nature of the world by slicing into the vein of creativity, immersing in it, and letting it flow over the geography of the moment (see Brady, 2003).¹⁰

Reflecting on her own field poetry, poet/anthropologist Toni Flores (1982) asks,

Why, in these poems, am I often identifying my concerns and preoccupations with those of some other person? Why am I so often struck by our common problems, our common humanity, our common being? I don't think that poetry is intrinsically more philosophical than prose; certainly I don't think it is intrinsically more generalizing. It may be, simply, that the unorthodoxy in the act of writing poetry as an ethnographic endeavor frees one from the orthodoxies of the endeavor itself; one breach of decorum breeds another. (p. 20)

Statements generated from such orientations can tell us important things about how people see their universe and feel about their circumstances, internal and otherwise. We can address our own "interiority" as a project and

share that knowledge with others (see Brady, 1991a; Prattis, 1986; Tarn, 1991; D. Tedlock, 1999). In this respect, poets aim at writing from one self-consciously calculated interiority to another—and they want to do so in a manner that stirs something up in us, gets our attention, finds the strange in the everyday, takes us to another circumstance, perhaps a cross-cultural one, takes us out of our inner selves for a moment to show us something about ourselves in general, what we have in common with the rest of the world, in principle if not in precisely reported fact, by category of experience, if not by scientifically specified domain.

Poetry takes its motivations and saturations from the Made World, from our dreams, and from the connections of both to the physical presence of being. It creates and occupies sensuous space that is connected to the deepest level of existence. It thrives in that part of consciousness where ideas and opinions are formed (cf. Simic, 2001, p. 34; Willson, 1995, p. 117), constructing the poet himself or herself even as the experience is unfolding. It is a self-revealing, self-constructing form of discovery, like writing in general (see Cottle, 2002; L. Richardson, 1997, 2000)—the upshot of that most fundamental of human activities, “storying.”¹¹ The very same thing can be said of science (see Hoffman, 2003; Wilson, 2002). But as already noted, consciousness and cultivation of this mindful process of interpretation do not proceed apace in poetry and science. The scientist overtly wants to discount his or her own role in it through selection for objectivity, laundering the experience to isolate the “facts” of the matter at hand, and of course, taking a hard right turn away from the poets on writing and other forms of reporting the results.¹²

The specific challenge of anthropological poetics (the broad field, of which ethnographic poetry can be considered a part) includes “the development of a genre of writing and reporting that systematically tries to incorporate satisfying and edifying poetic quality (foregrounding for clarity as well as aesthetic functions and the practical use of metaphor as a tool of discovery) without sacrificing the essence of ethnographic accountability” (Brady, 2000, p. 957).¹³ Ethnographic poets meditate on the ethnographic experience or focus on particulars arranged to elicit themes of general humanity that might apply cross-culturally. With the economy of poetic line phrasing and first-person voice, real or imaginary, they “talk story” about the erotics of fieldwork, things brought to mind with anticipation, alienation, reverie, and the excitement of discovery, in oneself and the relationship of that to outer world adventure. We also find in this exploratory literature fear, anxiety, loneliness, pain, reassurance, solidarity, ambition, confusion, failure, pleasures and puzzles of mind, and the stirrings of lust and love in cross-cultural settings—among many other topics. The point is not to exhaust the list of poetic evocations here. It is rather to reiterate that these are qualities essential to accounting for life from the perspective of humans as sentient beings that are likely to be laundered out of scientific reports. They are also qualities that poets can share vicariously with their audiences by paying strict attention to the reciprocal projec-

tions of self on others, an inevitable function of being a meaning-making social animal.¹⁴

Furthermore, because poets generally appear in anthropology today as knowingly situated, morally and ethically accountable participant-observers who respect the integrity of their subjects (cf. Brady, 1998; Denzin, 1997; Eagleton, 1983, p. 46; Simonelli, 2001), they have an opportunity to better inform the gaps of certain "Othernesses" that divide us, for example, in relations sorted by ethnicity, politics, gender, and age. Poets do not report their collected facts by talking *about* them in the typical manner of the social sciences. Instead of writing or talking through abstract concepts *about* the "facts" of life and some sense of their placement in the lives of the people studied without ever immersing deeply in their Made World, as one might proceed in writing or applying scientific theory, poets write *in* and *with* the facts and frameworks of what they see in themselves *in relation to* Others, in particular landscapes, emotional and social situations, sometimes just celebrating "the sheer fact of being alive" (Snyder, 1969, p. 118).¹⁵ By using these techniques to locate both a strangeness that keeps the reader from jumping to his or her own culturally demanding conclusions about the nature of what is reported, on one hand, and to evoke a larger sense of commonality between reporter and reader, the humanity that defines the relationship between the situation reported and its consumers, on the other, poets make the reporting effort both didactic *and* comparative by definition.

Poet Flores (1982) continues,

these circumstances seem to combine with others to lead up to a further interesting, if paradoxical, aspect of "field poetry," and that is the discovery or creation of new understandings of the writer's self. In writing poetry, not only is one concerned with particular selves, including one's own self, but also one faces at once in two directions—toward the concrete, sensual outer world, and toward the purely mental interior world. The worlds are allowed to co-exist, indeed to merge, without the accustomed mediation of synthesizing abstract concepts. What is more, freed from the need to mediate and abstract, we can surrender to the processes by which outer and inner not only interact, but also create each other. The writer can surrender to the processes of the metaphor and of the image, and therefore stimulate understanding. This is a different matter than the psychotherapeutic functions of poetry. . . . I am not talking here of exorcism; I am talking about making, building, constructing. (p. 20; see also L. Richardson, 2000)

Sharing these biographical and experiential spaces through heightened language and an ongoing process of resensualizing ourselves—and doing so "on the twin assumptions that all humans are tied together through certain substantive universals of being, and that the beings we encounter are sufficiently like ourselves to be open to empathetic construction, discovery, and reporting" (Brady, 2000, p. 957)—offers the prospect of getting to know each other in what are at once our most personal and yet universal forms of being human (see also Davies, 1999; L. Richardson, 1997). The result *may be* quite

loose in its grip on hard facts but very powerful in terms of communicating the humanity of the circumstances of the report. It also may be quite accurate as a means of conveying ethnography and history.

Beyond the received wisdom that conventionalizes and stereotypes academic publications in the social sciences today, there is nothing in the mix of human relations that says ethnography and history cannot be reported in different forms (see Brady, 2003; Hymes, 1995). Avoiding the artificial distancing in thought and writing that characterizes scientific endeavors, and tied as they are to individual perceptions and meanings that help to calculate both our individual personas and our ravelings to the others in and out of our own Made Worlds, poetic texts can be robust and powerful in their ability to communicate the reality of the experiences at hand, achieving a kind of sensuous and intellectual complementarity (cf. Blackburn, 1971) impossible to match through other means. They can "illuminate our experience, explore the consequences of our beliefs, challenge the ways we think, and criticize our ideologies" (Lakoff & Turner, 1989, p. xi). And the work is fundamental: "To understand the nature and value of poetic creativity requires us to understand the ordinary ways we think" (Lakoff & Turner, 1989, pp. xi-xii; see also M. Turner, 1996).¹⁶

Conclusions

The unfinalizability of ethnography is not so much a problem of unknowables.¹⁷ The overriding problem is plural "knowabilities" and the frustrations of choosing among them. (Or having someone choose for you, someone or some institution with the power to enforce the choice, say, society, for example. Or the Taliban. Or your department head.) With all of its structuring and laundering, scientific inquiry can help us sort the cognitive and semiotic clutter of life. It can give us a glimpse of ultimate causes, causal relationships among things and behaviors, patterns of things and behaviors. But even when that is done to the best advantage, giving viable interpretations, useful declarations of pattern, and so on, the results are still in the last analysis plural, imperfect, and impermanent. Meanings change with changing perceptions of changing environmental circumstances, and science does not cover that well. Science does not give us ordinary reality, the world we live in *as* we live it through our senses and our culturally programmed intellects.

Because multiple interpretations of the same phenomena are always possible for us as self-conscious thinkers engaged in meaningful relations with others, it follows that the silver bullet theory—the "one shot" theory that explains all, clarifies all, predicts all about human behavior—is not actually attainable, at least not by consensus. There will always be a plurality of meaning in what we experience, what we study, what we clarify, concretize, and otherwise try to explain. Moreover, because every newly established inter-

pretation becomes in its appearance and recognition a source for a new reading, a reopening, the role of the observer (reader, interpreter, writer) in the analytic equation cannot realistically be avoided. It follows that close interpretations of texts or societies must be infused at some level with self-conscious accountability for satisfactory results—with more than scientific forms of interpretation. There is a need for more delicate and realistic methods of representation in ethnography—at minimum, a need for cultivating the actor's point of view, Ours and insofar as it can ever be ascertained, that of Others. We need theories of the world that actually involve our interactions with it, not just abstractions from it. Poetry is another way to encode and share the foundations of such experience. Unafraid of its sensual immersions, its subjectivities, its mutual constructions of meaningful relationships, and deliberately fictionalized realities that “ring true,” poetic rendering is more than another way of telling (writing or speaking). It is another way of interpreting and therefore of knowing (Brady, 2003). That is something poets take for granted and silver bullet theorists never want to hear, let alone accommodate, so the contest between older ways and newer realities continues (Brady, 1991b, pp. 11-12).

Obviously missing from this humanistic agenda is the claim that only conventional science can provide a base for proper exploration and explanation. Also missing is the idea that the underlying essence of culture uncovered by the “mirror of nature” mind—as opposed to the more phenomenologically holistic experience of “things as they mean,” as they occur in ordinary reality—is really what matters. The progressive spiral of hermeneutic understanding keeps these ideas on the run and guarantees a return to the culturally specific for another look, even as it changes with every new gaze, before taking off again for wider views in comparative territory. The point of poetics in this is not only to keep the interpretive system grounded in self-awareness and self-conscious participation in the subject matter but also to keep premature closure on thinking in check while encouraging creativity in research and reporting that reaches for the polyphonic and related forms of intellectual harmony, including antiphony (Brady, 1991b, p. 12). It is a way of reminding us that science and poetry do different work; that they resonate at different levels of understanding and meaning; that some things cannot be known or said as effectively or at all any other way; that no single genre or method can capture it all; that nothing we say can be nested in the entirely new; and that the field of experience and representation is by definition both cluttered and incomplete for all of us at some level. So to privilege one form over the other as Truth for all purposes is to confuse apples and hammers, to be satisfied not only with one tool for all jobs but also with the politics of the moment, in and out of the academy (and its funding agencies).¹⁸

For these reasons and others, the entrance point for modern ethnography is probably best centered on some combination of humanistic and scientific

designs—in the realm of artful-science, not either extreme. But where it goes from there is crucial to the outcome. This is the point

where humanistic anthropology must both stall the process of knowing and open it up intellectually—where we must catch ourselves in the act of rushing headlong into conventional formats, of jumping to conclusions about where the experience must take us and how to communicate it to others, and begin to build a successful poetics into the framework. (Brady, 1991b, p. 20)

This is the juncture where poets reimmerge in the Made World, and where fact masters attempt to stay outside (having emerged themselves with personal identities and worldviews indelibly rooted in the Made World) and use their own jargon apparatus to count people, babies, houses, circumcisions, fish caught, and so on.¹⁹ They make models for studying other societies according to the same set of distantly formulated questions. That allows for high-level generalizations about the world and our place in it. But at what cost? A potentially huge distortion of empirical reality in the societies studied, using analytic categories whose only reality lies in the minds and agreements of the external researchers themselves.

Softening or solving such problems matters if we are ever going to get a handle on the ordinary realities of the people we study—the universe *they* know, interpret, and act in as sentient beings—as a way of understanding ourselves. People behave—negotiate meaningful paths—in their own terms, not necessarily in ours. Those realities escape only at great cost to understanding ourselves, how we are articulated socially and semiotically as human beings, how we construct our Selves as meaningful entities, in our own minds and in relation to each other, and what that means, what it contributes to acting as one in the many, many in the one, in the shrinking space of a shared planet.

Poets of all types want to be in that pool. They know that we are all native and stranger to each other at some level (see Denning, 1980, 1995, 1996), that the Otherness of obvious strangers collapses on close inspection—that we are parts of a common whole. Poetry bridges native and stranger. It insists on being about all of us. By not denying their own cultural foundations, biases, and skews, and by flagging their language as a proprietary function to boot, it follows that skilled poets immersed in Others can contribute significantly to our ethnographic knowledge pools and perhaps more important, to our knowledge of how such pools are constructed in the first place: eyeball to eyeball, person to person, self-conscious knowledge cuts very close to empirical ground in the sweaty little domain we call life. That experience plays out for all of us in a self-constructing arena largely as metaphor; for some, that same material is ripe pickings for poetic exposition. The result is a complex domain for and about Being-in-the-World. Ethnographers ignore it only at the risk of cloning the received wisdom, choking their range of discovery and creativity, and thereby duplicating the stultifying politics of the past.²⁰

With that in mind, we might ask (paraphrasing Rorty, 1981) what would happen if a bunch of ethnographically oriented poets sat down with a bunch of ethnographically oriented scientists (we could stretch it from poetry to physics as well—see Brady & Kumar, 2000) for a rational conversation about how they differ, how they match in research and reporting tactics in the study of a common “object,” the study of Others—and thereby Selves? What would happen if they made it work? Artful-science. (Or maybe the whole group would just be denied tenure.) This interesting (if dangerous) proposition leads to questions about the status quo ante and invites what philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn once defined nicely as “abnormal discourse,” that is, discussions in which the criteria for reaching analytic agreement in inventing and answering questions and making successful arguments are not themselves agreed on as a set of conventions. Such poolings encourage experimentation in thought and deed, “messy” texts, perhaps a kind of pan-disciplinary “social glue” for the moment, a premise for “hanging out” together more often—perhaps further discussion of the challenging idea that truth *is* ultimately a matter of agreeable conversation. We do not have to slip into solipsism to operate on that premise. We do have to oppose academic imperialism, abandon the idea that any single discipline has a monopoly on systematic thinking or rigor, and set a course for wider discussions of the nature of the world and our place in it—as we see it through the clutter and usually argue it—without abandoning the quest for rigor or reasonableness, and with an eye to finding the utility in each discipline as a means of clarifying the whole.²¹

Bottom line: We could call for this meeting on one simple premise—the pooled efforts of ethnographic science and anthropological poetics can give us more robust and complete accounting for and representation of our existence as meaning-making and meaning-craving Beings. We just do not want to put them in the same jar. . . .

REFRAIN

Why resist? Although the leaders of the new narrative turns are “morally and politically self-aware” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2002, p. xii), and the boundaries pushed in these “artful discourses” sharpen “moral sensibilities” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2002, p. xiii), speak for and through the socially disenfranchised in many instances, in addition to illuminating and in some cases closing the cultural gaps that separate Own from Other in general, and although it is true that some of the most impressive poetry anywhere is the poetry of conscience that speaks for moral beauty and calls for moral victories in times of moral and ethical collisions on the planet (see John, 1992, p. 16), it is my happy experience that poets are not really dangerous—unless, of course, they start telling the truth. Every tinhorn totalitarian (as Marshall Sahlins calls them) knows that that would be a good time to start outlawing poetry. Some have tried (e.g.,

poet Federico García Lorca was brutally executed in the Spanish Revolution in 1936, at age 38, for his conspicuous differences in the smotherings of the times and for the rising power of his words). Many "would be" silencers have failed. The poets march on, taking two principles of language very seriously: meaning is unlimited and everybody has some. So we say to the tinhorns: Kill and eat all the poets you want. We'll make more—in the underground, in our hearts, our thoughts, our stories, and the backrooms of our academies. And when the sun comes around again, look for us. We'll tell you why it's a metaphor for life and why we ought to put that kind of thinking right up front as an important avenue to clarity in what is otherwise the semiotic clutter of university studies, if not in that of society at large—nested, of course, as it must be, in sensuality, sensibility, and meanings made in the Made World.

NOTES

1. Which, of course, begs the problem of *how* we actually carve out limits, focal areas, a secure sense of our environments, worldview, and so on—it is "turtles all the way down" (see Derrida, 2002; Geertz, 1973, p. 29).

2. M. Richardson (1990) observes,

with fiction, ethnographers have found a writing that bridges distance between the reading self and the native other. By shifting the narrative point of view from that of the ethnographic observer who resides off the page in omniscient splendor to that of a participant who copes within the text in a condition of uncertainty, by allowing that participant to speak and be spoken to, but most of all, by bestowing a name upon the participant, a name—/Qui, the Bushman; Caeyama, the Yanomamö; Toussaint, the Haitian—the ethnographer creates an immediacy that gives life to an entombed prose. (p. 1)

See also Flores (1998) and Aitchison (2000) on the power of naming.

3. Speaking of the shared platforms used to launch into any kind of rendering or analysis of experience, it is important to focus on ontogeny (the biological concept) rather than exclusively on ontology (the logical concept) because we are interested in the places and processes of the whole organism in this case, the whole biocultural situation, not just incremental growths of knowledge, for one key reason: Fieldwork is anchored importantly in *how* we are at any given moment as sentient beings, not just what we know (or think we know) or try to learn from some adumbrated agenda of things to know picked up in graduate school. Moreover, having the whole organism situated self-consciously in the Made World is the high prospect for every poet:

I was there in body and spirit, this is what I saw, this is what happened to me, this is what I think about it; this is how it happened; in the active, transitive act of perceiving and relating, this is how it unfolded, and this is how it felt.

Scientific reporting requires excising all of those "I's" and "me's" in principle, not to mention most references to how doing an analysis "feels," but even that is deceptive. It

can never be done absolutely. We are each saturated by our original Made World, at one level or another, consciously or not, all the time.

4. There is a logical structure in this challenge and it is fairly easy to outline. Every society separates its views of itself—its internally calculated “truths of being” in the culture of itself—its Own culture, from whatever else it encounters on the planet that is not, and is therefore Other. Calculating from Own to Own culture and from Own to Other culture across the boundaries between two societies gives a fourfold set of possibilities. The relationship is dyadic, representing two Made World’s and each side’s collective views of what is Own and what is Other. Humanistic ethnographers want to make the largest cognitive and cultural leap by traveling from their own Made World to what is “Own” in another Made World, in that sense, attempting to immerse themselves in an Other’s emics, to assimilate and articulate that other world with some substantive and reliable knowledge of the actors’ points of view, knowing full well that that can never be done completely or absolutely. The most parochial scientific ethnographers want to extend the analytic categories (not their ordinary reality) from their own Made World to cross-cultural Others on the premise that there is no need to immerse in the Made Worlds of those people. This is strict etics, calculated ostensibly *only* from the observers’ points of view. Ethnoscience is an interesting mix of these things—an extreme form of artful-science, drawing as it does so heavily on one’s Own analytic frames (formal semantic analysis) to analyze the cognitive/semiotic universes of a deeply researched Other. Still, perfection in reading Others is elusive, imperfect, guaranteed to be lopsided, no matter what stance the observer takes (see especially Geertz, 1983).

5. Flores (1982) wrote about her fieldwork in Spain: “As I am different from each of them, so they are different from each other, and as they are like each other, so are they and I alike” (p. 20). She also knew that these relations can and do change with context, not just in the obvious sense of what is Own and what is not, what is shared at any particular point in a relationship and what is not, but also in the short and the long run of evolving shared experience, as what is at first strange becomes more familiar—net effects of cognitive and cultural growth as it plays off the social construction of reality and makes us the people we are in relation to others over time. Static models miss the point of this dynamism; contrived objectivity misses the mutuality of its construction.

6. Note that we are not only concerned with poetry in this. Spry (2001) observes that, “Auto-ethnographic performance makes us acutely conscious of how we ‘I-witness’ our own reality constructions. Interpreting culture through the self-reflections and cultural refractions of identity is a defining feature of autoethnographic performance” (p. 706). “Autoethnography contributes to the burgeoning possibilities of representing human action. It is one tool among many designed to work in the fields . . . [and] . . . a method that calls upon the body as a site of scholarly awareness and corporeal literacy” (Spry, 2001, p. 727; see also Reed-Danahay, 1997).

7. Objectivity is a specialized manipulation of language to give the *appearance* of a disappeared self—say, the author of a scientific text. It is a magic trick. If you believe it is actually possible, you must then account for all of those women sawed in half, elephants disappearing on stage, rabbits popping out of hats, and Disneyworld castles going invisible for the moment. Such things are not consistent with the reality framework we have learned while emerging as Beings-in-the-Made-World of, say, America, and they are certainly not consistent with the pragmatics of positivistic thinking. Why should we then be convinced by the deception of writing in our scientific reports?

Answer: It is a convenient fiction (though not often recognized as such) that allows the "data to speak for themselves," sets up a framework for the myth of the "ethnographic present," and more. This is not to deny the practicality of viewing things as objectively as possible for certain purposes (e.g., measuring fuel in a rocket). And I am certainly not advocating displacing science with poetics. That would be absurd. I am only trying to flag the nature of this objectivity device as textual and therefore cultural and artificial. It does not privilege the user with some kind of "mirror of nature" mind (Rorty, 1979). There is also a danger in subconsciously accepting scientific objectivity as an expository device—in seeing through it, ignoring it as a contrivance, and on the unconscious strength of our "coming into being" processes, of simply accepting the analytic and substantive interpretations yielded from the data so examined. What is "cultural" in the presentation becomes a "natural" model to us in this way, and that is what we use most ethnocentrically as our reality framework for interpreting, comparing, and reporting our understanding of the nature of the rest of the world. The political risk in that is obvious: Arbitrary cultural orientations are enforced as the "natural order of things" by the people and institutions capable of doing so—self-enfranchisement and promotion in a hierarchy of social relations (see Barthes, 1972; Foucault, 1970).

8. In part because of scientific or objective-sounding language that draws heavily on dead metaphors, that is, metaphors that have lost most of their original content and strangeness (see Lakoff & Johnson, 1980); and in part, as poet/ethnographer Dennis Tedlock (1999) says, because "prose seems closer to 'natural' language, whereas lyric verse wears artifice on its face" (p. 156).

9. My statement here is misleading in a way because the kinds of comparisons at stake for scientific versus more humanistic operations have been dramatically different. Typical of social scientific work in general, some of the positivist agenda in earlier anthropology had worldwide trait distributions in mind for points of comparison, that is, making comparisons of Other cultures using its Own concepts, cognitive categories, and paradigms as the fulcrum for all; these are not self-conscious, self-critical comparisons. See especially Boon (1982, 1999) for a prolific, literate, and poetic commitment to this important feature in anthropology—a brilliant exemplar of how a more self-conscious anthropology might proceed in its cross-cultural comparisons. Boon has a way of skinning the beast of arch-positivism without killing the animal altogether (see Brady, 1993, on Boon, 1982).

10. This is not to imply that science (as usually practiced) is somehow lacking in creativity. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Science thrives on revising and rewriting itself creatively, especially when powerful work can be drawn from surprising (or the least suspected) sources (see Miller, 1996; Tarn, 1991, p. 7). The problem for poetic interest lies in what is done with that work once created, how it is gutted of its humanism and reformed through laundering for selflessness, facticity, and so forth. Matching up these innovative processes in science and poetics is prime territory for creating what George Marcus (1994) has called "messy texts," that is, texts that do "several aesthetic and jobs simultaneously and few of them exactly according to established disciplinary interests or form" (Brady, 2003, p. xvi; see also Denzin, 1997).

11. This leads to a renewed interest in the kinds of rhetorical structures that are often assumed to be antithetical to current "scientific" modes of discourse, including narrative, fictional, historical, dramaturgical, performative, and poetic, and to curiosity about the origins of these forms. In that connection, anthropologists are happy to declare that shamanism (the world's oldest profession) is the root of all oral, poetic, and performative art—a point made effectively by the ethnopoet Jerome Rothenberg (1981;

see also Rothenberg & Rothenberg, 1983), anthropologist Michael Harner (1990), and others. That links us to the Paleolithic (ca. 100,000 years ago) and opens up ethnographic inquiry to an enlarged sense of communal ties through the history of talk, performance, myth, poetry, and being "in place," among other considerations (see Abram, 1996; Brady, 2003; Flores, 1999).

12. Compare poet/scientist Roald Hoffmann's (2003) remark about scientific narratives: "Sadly in the published accounts of theories, much of the narrative of the struggle for understanding is left out, because of self-censorship and the desire to show us as more rational than we were" (p. 10).

13. What Denzin and Lincoln (2002) refer to as "ethnographic poetics" (p. xii) I call "anthropological poetics" (see Brady, 1991b, 2000, 2003), primarily to emphasize the importance of the whole biocultural organism, the sentient being who steps into this narrative turn. Either way, the category can be divided into three forms: "*ethnopoetics*, 'the emics of native poetics that are midwifed by western poets' (Rose 1991:220); *native poetry*, the poetry of traditional native poets; and *ethnographic poetics*, the poetic productions of ethnographers," further subdivided as "personal poetry, which is unshaped by the anthropological experience, and those poetic productions that meditate on this experience and re-articulate it within the poetic frame" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2002, pp. xii-xiii).

14. Insofar as the Other's projections can actually be known, of course. This process shows up as "sympathetic co-experience" and is perhaps best exemplified analytically by the dialogics in Mikhail Bakhtin's large corpus of work.

15. So how do we send in the poets? With what instructions? The poet's field guides are processual and very personal. They look less like menus or lab clearances and more like territorial maps with an exhortation to pay attention while you are in the neighborhood. Something of this context is captured with humor and truth by Joyce Carol Oates (2002) in her novel *Beasts*, with a student speaking:

Mr. Harrow has lost patience with our attempts at poetry. Like a father disappointed with his children yet emotionally bound to them, Mr. Harrow insisted that we keep "intimate, honest" journals preparatory to writing our poetry. He wanted "no lies, no subterfuge, no 'nice-girl' bullshit." We were to record our dreams, our fantasies, our hopes, our visions; our personal relationships with parents, siblings, friends, lovers; we were to examine our emotional, physical, sexual lives as if we were "anatomical specimens." If we wanted to be writers we must examine the world with fresh, skeptical eyes. . . . Especially, Mr. Harrow warned us against the dangers of self-censorship, "self-castration." (pp. 67-68)

16. One also has to know how to read the results. It is a mistake to judge the contents of humanistic reports (including conventional prose with high author visibility, poetic prose, verse) by the data and form expectations of the more distanced scientific orientations. Each orientation does different—but, as I have argued—complementary things. For pellucid discourse on the prospects of bringing together the ideas of science and poetry in our wider lives, see Midgley (2001); see also the thoughtful work of Montgomery (1996).

17. "Anthropological knowledge [indeed, any putative knowledge] is also to be judged in regard to how it integrates with what else passes as knowledge" (Roth, 1990, p. 276).

18. The penalties for deviation are well known in the academy: no job, if a job, no tenure, if tenure, no promotion, if no promotion, no raises, and so forth. Academic imperialism at its finest.

19. Is this the point of choice between metaphors and theory, between analogical reasoning and analytical or normative reasoning? Torres (2000) argues that “for all the power of allegories, metaphors and analogies, they tend to be static, impressionistic-oriented and descriptive more than analytical”; that metaphors “should have no place in social sciences if they substitute for social theorizing, including metatheory (or epistemology), empirical theory and normative theory” (p. 430); that “They can only be serviceable when embedded in a theoretical framework” (p. 431). All of this collapses into an untenable argument once the inevitable presence and the power of metaphor *in* scientific discourse is recognized. Of course, it is also true that just having a metaphor that seems to carry the moment of discovery and enlightenment has little methodological value if it is not put to work in larger narratives of extrapolation and comparison. But positivism has no monopoly on the power to do that either, and reader receptions of such work might in fact be greater if it is couched less in the abstractions of social science and more in the language of life as lived. Therein lies the rub: Is it to be art or science? Worse, conventional discourse exaggerates the boundaries, making all such domain claims porous (see Brady, 1991a, 2003).

20. For rich examples of the kind of information about being human that flows from “poetic immersion” in ethnographic subjects, see Behar (1996); Denning (1980, 1995, 1996, 1998); Farella (1993); Jackson (1986, 1995); Nabhan (1982); Nelson (1983); M. Richardson (1990); Rose (1989); J. O. Stewart (1989); K. Stewart (1996); B. Tedlock (1992); D. Tedlock (1990); and Wilmsen (1999). For a sampling of poetry in the same vein, see Brady (2003); Diamond (1982, 1986); Flores (1999); Friedrich (1979, 1995); Hymes (1995); Kusserow (1998, 1999); Nowak (2000); Prattis (1986); M. Richardson (1998a, 1998b, 1999, 2001); Simonelli (2001); D. Tedlock (1990); and compare Fox (2000). See also the poetry and articles carried regularly in *Qualitative Inquiry* and *Anthropology and Humanism*. Much of the work published in these journals is grounded specifically in the problems of representing fieldwork. I also think that the whole enterprise can profit from a careful reading of D. Tedlock (1983, 1999) on the problems and prospects of cross-cultural translation and implications for poetic and ethnographic renderings; Tarn (1991) on being an anthropological poet, misunderstood relationships between poetry and science, and more; and the various writings of Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Gary Snyder on living a cross-cultural life—work that does not seem to have settled into a realm of reading and citation equal to its potential importance for ethnographic inquiry, poetic or not.

21. [IB] Q. “Given our need for rich and thick understandings in this culturally plural and semiotically cluttered world, should we not push the clouds on every horizon through every conceivable means?” [YL] A. “Multiple perspectives, particularly on social issues, social problems, are usually more effective than ‘single shot’ methods, e.g., statistics. Additive methodologies have the advantage of bringing to bear the poet, the philosopher, the statistician/mathematician, the spiritual leader/theologian; the lawyer, the anthropologist, and the like. In its simplest—and, from my perspective, most naïve form—it is treated as ‘mixed-method’ research, meaning you do a little quantitative, then you do a little qualitative. I try to help students see that it is not this simple nor is it this naïve. We need far more than simply ‘methods’ perspectives; we need whole philosophical and discursive structures brought to bear” (Yvonna Lincoln, personal communication, April 3, 2002).

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