

## SOCIAL THOUGHT AND COMMENTARY

# Reflexivity Redux: A Pithy Polemic on “Positionality”

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It is now taken for granted that a good ethnography should be “reflexive.” But what exactly does that mean? Most basically, reflexivity describes the capacity of any system of signification, including a human being—an anthropologist—to turn back upon or to mirror itself. Twenty years ago, Jay Ruby’s edited volume, *A Crack in the Mirror: Reflexive Perspectives in Anthropology* (1982), confirmed the arrival of reflexivity in our discipline, although the concept itself was not entirely novel. In their jointly authored introduction, Ruby and Barbara Myerhoff recounted the “ancient” history of reflexive thinking, citing the case of stories about storytellers telling stories, and drew attention to some of the “early” experiments in reflexive approaches to ethnography, such as Elenore Smith Bowen’s *Return to Laughter* (1954)<sup>1</sup> and Gerald Berreman’s *Behind Many Masks* (1962).

Twenty years ago, reflexivity was proposed as a corrective to a mode of ethnographic writing in which factual material was presented by an omniscient yet invisible author-narrator whose methods of fieldwork and data collecting were not always manifest, and who did not address the effect of her or his presence on others, much less the various effects that others may have had on her or him. Twenty years ago, there were no established conventions for writing a single manuscript reflexively, as opposed to a factual ethnography followed by a more diary-like

“confessional” text. Since then, many modes of reflexive writing have been explored and reflexive lexicons introduced. Twenty years ago, it may have been premature to question the excesses of the nascent concept of reflexive anthropology, but now that “reflexivity” is a commonplace, it is time to revisit the concept and to initiate a critical but hopefully salutary appraisal of its many uses and guises, beginning with a consideration of the relationship between reflexive thinking and mirroring. What follows are some informally presented thoughts, or “talking points,” about reflexivity and its conceptual offshoots provoked and quickened over the year by ideas, insights, and concerns gleaned from a broad range of books and articles as well as from working with graduate students of anthropology.<sup>2</sup>

The word “mirror”—both the noun and the verb—was frequently encountered in anthropological circles, whether as part of a title or as a description of didactic technique, well before the publication of *A Crack in the Mirror*. In Clyde Kluckhohn’s *Mirror for Man* (1949), anthropological inquiry was likened to a mirror held before us to allow and encourage a better understanding of ourselves through the study of others. However, a mirror is not an inert device and can be deployed to contain or control differences and oppositions. Thus, in *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1946), written during WW2, Ruth Benedict’s mirror rendered Japanese national character intelligible as American national character *the other way around*. In order to make America’s “most alien enemy” appear more human, Benedict positioned Japanese and Americans as the mirror image of each other: “[t]he arc of life in Japan is plotted in opposite fashion to that in the United States” (Benedict 1946: 253-4; see Robertson 1998). However humane her anthropological motives, Benedict made getting to know Japan too easy, and the Japan she profiled was all too knowable, a legacy that Japan anthropologists continue to grapple with in different ways.

The potential of mirrors to create the conditions for both solipsism and reification should be obvious. Moreover, an anthropologist’s metaphoric mirror can render her or him the *de facto* ethnographic subject, and turn the self into the fieldsite. Egocentrism is one of the pitfalls to avoid in exercising reflexivity. A laudable theory about epistemology, reflexivity is also a method for conducting fieldwork and constructing ethnographies. A reflexive anthropologist intentionally or self-consciously shares (whether in agreement or disagreement) with her or his audiences the underlying assumptions that occasion a set of questions. Those interactions in turn guide the ways in which answers to those questions are sought and that ultimately shape the narrative form in which both the questions and answers are posed, interpreted, and analyzed (cf. Ruby 1980). However, self-consciousness can also become an end in itself. Because autobiography and

the first-person narrative are usually the modes in which one expresses or conveys self-consciousness to others, there is always the possibility that an ethnographer can become preoccupied with self-representation.

Consider autobiography, for example. One of the reflexive techniques utilized by some anthropologists, autobiography is a distinctive literary mode and not simply any form of self-expression or self-representation. An autobiography presents a version, myth, or metaphor of the self and is also retrospective, and thus must self-consciously contrast two selves, the writing “I” and the one located (or created) in the past. Various tropes of origin are invoked in an effort to locate or create a beginning. A popular trope among autobiographers is that of childhood, in which selective experiences are remembered—that is, re-membered, as in reconstituted—for the purposes of a “real-time” argument or interpretation. The role of childhood in autobiography is to furnish a point of departure, a way of beginning a narrative emplotment of one’s life together with all the other lives in which one is implicated. Incorporated into ethnographies, stories of one’s childhood are often told as a type of personal testimony, an “I was there” stamp of authentic, if *ex post facto* and anachronistic, authoritative experience.

By the same token, ethnographers have often characterized themselves as children, ostensibly because at the outset of fieldwork (despite years of preliminary research), they say they have felt like children, away from home and wandering within a confusing welter of partially comprehended images and encounters that they have not yet learned to negotiate. The trope of childhood is also sometimes employed as a blatantly literary device to invert or level (on paper at least) the presumed “power relationship” between the ethnographer and the (implicitly less powerful) people among whom she or he lives and works. These uses of the trope of childhood by ethnographers differ in content and intention from stories told and retold—or reciprocated—in the course of responding to unprompted questions by others about one’s upbringing and youthful experiences.

A personal anecdote at this point will help elaborate my argument. I remember being puzzled when a reviewer of my first book (on affective city planning and local-place consciousness in Japan) seemed to think that the inclusion of stories based on memories of my childhood in Kodaira City would have improved my historical and contemporary ethnography of that Tokyo suburb.<sup>3</sup> The reviewer’s implication was that such stories spun from my memories of childhood were somehow equivalent in value and usefulness both to the archival and field data I had carefully collected, translated, and interpreted over a two-year period, and to my accounts of personal encounters with Kodaira residents

and civil servants. In what way stories from my childhood would have made a qualitative or even a rhetorical improvement to the book, and where in my narrative they would have been relevant, was not made clear; that they would have been relevant was taken to be self-evident.

I am not at all suggesting that stories about childhood have no place in an ethnography, but rather that their inclusion should be more than a gratuitous gesture toward the latest academic *dernier cri*, regardless of relevance. By the same token, confidence in one's authorial "voice" ought not to lie in genealogical claims or childhood experience, but in the assiduous fieldwork and archival research necessary to generate historically resonant, thick descriptions and subtly evocative interpretations of people's lives in all their messy complexity. I would be the last person to dismiss the advantages to an ethnographer of the profound familiarity that long-term residence in a place can afford. However, such familiarity is most effectively conveyed not by superficial claims to "insider" status, but in the thoughtful choice of ethnographic subject and the caliber and subtlety of research undertaken to elucidate it.

An emergence of a newer trope of origin employed to convey an author's reflexive "voice" parallels the corporatization of American universities, where affirmative action can be respun as a type of "niche marketing" informed by identity politics.<sup>4</sup> Affirmative action was introduced to the academy in the wake of the civil rights movement and through feminist activism. Over the past two or three decades, persons representing a hitherto underrepresented sex, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, disability, religion, socio-economic status, and so forth, collectively and steadily have complicated, thankfully and for the better, the social texture of American institutions. Recently, however, buffeted by market forces, those same identity-categories have been packaged as "ready to wear" consumables guaranteed to clarify one's location or position within the undulating academic landscape. Invoking the clunky term "positionality," anthropologists today often begin a manuscript with the words, "writing as a [name the category]." The operative assumption is that "positionality" is a condition of and for reflexivity. But is it really?

A major problem with "writing as a [name the category]" is that the ethnographer's positionality either precedes the fieldwork experience or is deployed after the fact, during the write-up phase, to locate oneself in what might be termed the "topophilic" academy. These categories are the "ready to wear" products of an identity politics that has been especially endemic to American universities. Wearing these categories as if self-evident does not reveal but can instead actually obscure one's unique personal history, even as these categories impart an illusion of self-conscious identity formation. Another personal anecdote

dote may be illustrative here. A reviewer of my second book, on the sexual and colonial politics embodied by Takarazuka, the popular Japanese all-female revue founded in 1913,<sup>5</sup> wondered why I had not “positioned” myself in the book *as an* “academic, white, Westerner, woman.” I was amazed and distressed by how someone I had never met—but who perhaps had seen me from a distance at a conference—felt perfectly serene about naming the specific identity-categories to which I apparently should have loudly pledged allegiance at the outset of my book. These generic, fixed categories effectively efface the complexity of my personal and professional lives, not to mention my family’s histories. By the same token, the reviewer also assumed that the people I was working and socializing with and I were mirror images (that is, opposites) of each other, and that our relationship *could only have been* defined by unequal power plays. A more careful and patient reading of my densely layered book would have yielded much about the multiple and shifting ways in which I both presented myself, appeared to, and was conscious of appearing to the various people I had lived and worked among for over a decade.

Positionality, as practiced by anthropologists, is premised on ever more specific categories of identity that can invoke a kind of cultural relativity. Positionality is also a key component of the so-called Western self-critique. “So-called” because critical appraisals of anthropology and the colonial encounter so often, in their critiques, retain an asymmetrical relationship between “the West” and “the Third World.” Although neither “the West” nor “the Third World” exists as an internally coherent entity, there is a tendency to treat both as singular and homogeneous formations defined in terms of their experience of colonialism and imperialism, where “the West” is the supreme change agent and “the Third World” the irreversibly changed reactant (cf. Ahmad 1986). Moreover, this binarist formula ignores the histories and present-day circumstances of multiple non-Euro-American colonizers and imperialist regimes, as well as new forms of colonialism spearheaded by multinational corporations, whether headquartered in the Netherlands or in Saudi Arabia, not to mention religious fundamentalists all over the world.

Not only can positionality become a form of self-stereotyping, it can also effectively stereotype others in a way similar to mirroring: as “the self” the other way around. By writing “as a [name the category],” an ethnographer proceeds on the basis of two problematic sets of assumptions. The first is that ethnographers, multi-sensory human beings with unique personal histories, are reducible to, or universally intelligible as, one or several “ready to wear” identities. The second set of assumptions is that the people among whom ethnographers live and work are capable only of reacting to the ethnographers’ presence which, in turn, irreversibly

alters their lifeways. The implication is that people everywhere, regardless of every possible distinguishing variable, are susceptible to the whims of puissant ethnographers, whether they are doing fieldwork in "their own" countries or elsewhere, or among remote herders or urban white-collar workers. In this connection, I was most bewildered, when, during a seminar devoted to discussing my book, *Takarazuka: Sexual Politics and Popular Culture in Modern Japan* (2001 [1998]), a graduate student, who was a supporter the anti-sweatshop movement, opined that my critical characterization of the powerful, multinational Hankyû Corporation, was a "act of colonialism." Hankyû is the despotic owner of, among other things, the all-female Takarazuka Revue, and, during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, colluded in the state's empire-building project. The student felt that my refusal to regurgitate Hankyû's ahistorical "official story," as told in its public relations brochures, deprived the corporation of its "voice!"

Few would disagree with the observation that the world (whether first or third) was *never not* transcultural. Cultural encounters and their effects are the *sine qua non* of human life, whether that life is lived by a New Guinea hill tribe or Japanese yuppies. Of course, one must never forget that there have been imbalances, often large, associated with "the crossing of cultural borders: conquest, colonialism, imperialism, tourism, or scholarly interest all involve choice and require power, even if only buying power" (Taylor 1991:63). However uneven or unequal in power or degree, cultural encounters are "shifting processes" and do not constitute unidirectional teleologies. All parties to and involved in the encounter are affected and modified by it, often with very different consequences (Robertson 2001 [1998]: 291, n. 23).

Writing "as a [name the category]" may serve to position or locate an anthropologist within the academy's paint-by-number landscape, but going to do fieldwork "as a [name the category]" is an *a priori* position that can effectively render an ethnographer impervious to intellectual, aesthetic, and emotional transformations and challenges from new encounters, acquaintances, and experiences. Yet these are just the sort of encounters and epiphanies that are central to generating reflexivity. Ironically, the trope of "positionality" can recapitulate the problem that reflexive anthropology aims to help solve; offered as a solution to self-complacency, the politics of location can contain within it the problem it was to have resolved. Family history, ethnicity, sexuality, disability, and religion, among other distinctions, can be usefully woven into an ethnographic narrative, but only if they are not left self-evident as essentialized qualities that are magically synonymous with self-consciousness, or, for that matter, with intellectual engagement and theoretical rigor. Their usefulness

must be articulated and demonstrated because such distinctions are not fixed points but emerge and shift in the contiguous processes of doing and writing about fieldwork.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, it has been my own experience, living, working, and playing in Japan, Sri Lanka, Germany, Israel, England, Korea, Egypt and elsewhere, that not only do American-made identities lack cachet outside of U.S. universities, but that “wearing” them in the field as a self-conscious positioning device is pointless because most people in most places are quite proficient at assigning labels and creating positions of their own for others and themselves. “Arm-chair theorists” may not realize, or may sometimes forget, that ethnographers are not the only wielders of mirrors. Theories can only be developed and modified by engaging with an ever-expanding body of tangible information, lest they lose their value as theories and become frozen as formulaic explanations (Vance 1985:18; Robertson 2001 [1998]: 24). Thus, like a barometer, a reflexive anthropologist will record the labeling and mirroring practices of others and be attentive to how such contingencies shape her or his project. Twenty years ago Jay Ruby began to examine the cracks in the *anthropological* mirror. Is it not time to renew our efforts to understand, self-consciously, the peoples and places behind all those *other* mirrors?

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The nom de plume of Laura Bohannon.

<sup>2</sup>I wrote the first, very rough version of this essay as discussant’s comments for the AAA panel, “Going Native in Asia” (29 November 2001), organized by Professor Sonia Ryang.

<sup>3</sup>*Native and Newcomer: Making and Unmaking a Japanese City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994 [1991]).

<sup>4</sup>I thank Alexandra Stern for the expression “niche marketing.” See also Robertson (1998) for an elaboration of the effects of corporatization on academic departmental politics.

<sup>5</sup>*Takarazuka: Sexual Politics and Popular Culture in Modern Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001 (1998)).

<sup>6</sup>Fieldwork here is broadly defined to include archives.

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