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Ian Barnard
Chapman University, barnard@chapman.edu

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The author

Ian Barnard
California State University, Northridge _____

ANTI-ETHNOGRAPHY?

Many of the ongoing difficulties teachers face revolve around the "translation" of disciplinary knowledge—especially critical theory—into pedagogical praxis. It often seems that our teaching lags behind our theoretical knowledge by about two decades, and sometimes we wonder if it will ever catch up. This sense of disjunction has been compounded by the difficulty of teaching postmodern understandings of subjectivity, truth, and epistemology in an increasingly commodified teaching context, where consumers expect to purchase a clear, identifiable, and literally usable product, and where "knowledge" often means easily digestible and repeatable content rather than analytic skills, critical understandings, or complex world views. Prescriptive standards, standardized testing, common syllabi, assessment, and outcomes become more important than ideas.

Given the lag between theory and pedagogy, I am no longer surprised when the law students who turn up in my college composition classes believe that good judges are impartial judges, or when the journalism majors insist that effective journalists are objective, despite the fact that both the possibility and desirability of objectivity have been thoroughly discredited in recent and ongoing research in critical anthropology, critical legal studies, postcolonial theory, feminist theory, queer theory, and so on. Either what my students are learning in their law and journalism and other classes is out of sync with cutting-edge scholarship in the disciplines, or what they have learned in these classes has not yet been able to withstand the more powerful forces of students' and societal pre-assumptions. This is not to say that writing instructors have been able to avoid theory-practice disjunctions. The order of business in many composition classrooms and textbooks seems to be business as usual, not only in spite of the overwhelming force of postmodern composition theory that has persuasively critiqued practices like freewriting and notions like authentic voice, but also of

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Ian Barnard is assistant professor of English and Teachers for a New Era faculty fellow at California State University, Northridge. His previous publications include articles in *Issues in Writing* and *Radical Teacher*, and the book *Queer Race: Cultural Interventions in the Racial Politics of Queer Theory*.

particular interest to me here, despite the assaults on ethnographic disciplines and practices that have taken place for almost four decades now. As Clifford Geertz put it, "What once seemed only technically difficult, getting 'their' lives into 'our' works, has turned morally, politically, even epistemologically delicate. . . . Indeed, the very right to write—to write ethnography—seems at risk" (130). Since the 1960s, challenges to conventional ethnography have included charges that its presumptions to objectivity (and, on a larger scale, its pretensions to being a "science") are fallacious, that its almost-inevitable origin in the West and frequent focus on non-Western Others reproduce ethnocentric biases, that the power relations between ethnographer and subject(s) reinforce existing inequities, and that its efforts to produce knowledge about the Third World collude in the imperialist project.

It has become quite fashionable for composition classes to include ethnographic assignments, but sometimes we are so thankful to receive a paper that is detailed and well-written that we forego challenging our students and ourselves to ask the bigger questions underlying the kind of work and writing involved in the assignment. Wendy Bishop's history of ethnographic writing research notes that significant numbers of composition scholars moved to ethnographic approaches in the 1980s and 1990s (12-15). This work, in turn, led teachers of composition to give more ethnographic assignments in their classes. More recently, composition scholars have both participated in the critiques of ethnography that began before composition's adoption of ethnographic practices and responded to these critiques by scrutinizing ethnographic practices in composition scholarship and pedagogy.[1] However, while a new breed of "postmodern" ethnography is making its appearance in several disciplines, in many places the theory/praxis gap remains as wide as ever: traditional (uncritical) ethnographies continue to be produced (by compositionists and by scholars in other fields), and new composition textbooks and assignments often seem unaware of this history of "anti-ethnography." For example, the 2004 composition reader, *Exploring Literacy*, includes a section on "Writing in Ethnographic Genres" that rehearses the most conventional of ethnographic epistemologies and methodologies, and uses as a model essay an uncritical 1975 article that, in turn, acknowledges its debt to a "classic article" from 1964 (Kutz 250). The 1980s and 1990s seem to be forgotten by the book's editor, and the book fails to grapple with the more complex and contested understanding of ethnography we have today. (Something that even revised editions of Margaret Mead's now classic ethnography, *Coming of Age in Samoa*, routinely address in their prefaces these days.) In its prompts for possible writing assignments, the text instructs student writers to use their ethnographic observations "to give as rich a picture as possible of community life" and urges them to "bring out the larger patterns of meaning" they have found in the communities that

are the subject of their ethnographic research (279). Nowhere does the assignment question the accuracy or efficacy of the ethnographer's supposedly omniscient gaze or the ethnographer's moral right to construct the "meaning" of a community based on a few hours of observation.

Frequently our own writing about our students and their work (though we often don't think of this as ethnography) uncritically reproduces some of the problematic traits of conventional ethnography. For instance, the common practice in composition research of referring to real students by their first names only, or still more troubling, by made-up names, echoes the hierarchies between subject and object in imperialist anthropology: the Others are anonymous, interchangeable, unindividualized, and, most importantly, their subjectivity can never match the authority of the writing subject. A case in point is Nancy Welch's 2002 *College Composition and Communication* article, "And Now That I Know Them': Composing Mutuality in a Service Learning Course." The article is exemplary in the author's articulation of the complex power relations between her students and their ethnographic subjects. However, Welch's own representation of her students is still very conventional. The opening paragraph of the piece introduces a quotation from one of the students: "Shifting back and forth between present and past tense, Janis writes:" (243). And the first footnote explains, "I've fictionalized the name of the community center as well as the names of the teens and staff [about whom the students wrote]. I draw on Janis's and Jacqui's writings with their permission" (261). But the text offers no explanation for why students are referred to by first names only (in contrast to the other "professional" sources cited). Presumably "Janis" and "Jacqui" are the students' "real" names, since the author doesn't state otherwise (as she does with the names of the students' ethnographic subjects). Did the students request that the author use only their first names? Did the author assure them that only their first names would be used, as is the convention in composition scholarship's reference to the scholar's students? Was the use of first names a tool of reassurance to get the students to agree to allow the author to quote their work? Was the impression given not only that this is the "way things are done" but also that this is somehow the more desirable way of doing things for the students, that this is for their benefit? The text offers no explanation.[2] For examples of composition scholarship that resist the problematic kinds of representations of students I have been discussing, I refer readers to Rebecca Moore Howard's "Standing in the Shadows of Giants" and Janice Chernekoff's "Teaching the Rhetorical Possibilities of the Personal Essay." Chernekoff cites her students by first and last names, parallel to her references to professional scholars, and gives full citation information for students' papers in her list of Works Cited. Her student sources are thus accorded the same degree of legitimacy (as writers and scholars) as her other sources. Howard explicitly calls

for students to be recognized as "authors" (137) and uses her students in her discussions of plagiarism not merely to make a point about student writing, but as authoritative sources of opinion on the topic.

My aim in the preceding analysis it not to demonize Welch, but to point to a representative instance of a common practice in composition scholarship where we can see the theory/praxis gaps I have been charting, and to develop a heuristic to problematize my representation of my own students in this article. As I discussed with my students how I might best represent them in this article, we were faced with several dilemmas. If I am to avoid speaking for them, should I merely quote them precisely? But aren't quotes inevitably manipulated to suit the quoter's agenda, and wouldn't my quoting of them still result in the same kind of appropriation of their voices as my speaking for them? What about having my students as co-authors of this article? To what extent would they be able to exert control over the text and its reception, given academic hierarchies' overdetermination of the etiquettes and understandings undergirding scholarly writing, and given my position in these hierarchies and knowledge of the conventions vis-à-vis my students? There are no clear-cut solutions to these problematics; the recognition of this indeterminacy, however, can become a productive pedagogical tool for unsettling students' and teachers' desires for quick fixes or definitive answers.

My own attempt to intersect ethnographic theory with pedagogical practice began with a writing course I developed for Social Sciences students focusing on the question of how we should represent Others. This course is part of an innovative program of advanced writing courses required of students at the university where I was teaching. All students are required to complete an expository writing course beyond their first-year composition course and are given courses to choose from that are either discipline-specific ("Law," "Engineering") or that group disciplines together under broader categories (e.g., "Arts and Humanities"). I decided to develop my course for Social Sciences students around the issue of ethnographic representation since this has become one of the central ethical concerns impacting many disciplines and areas within the Social Sciences (and elsewhere), including gerontology, anthropology, ethnography, history, political science, social work, psychology, journalism, international relations, marketing, advertising, linguistics, education, women's studies, queer theory, disability studies, postcolonial studies, and ethnic studies. Of added importance to me as a compositionist, this is also a writing issue, since most of these representations of the Other take the form of written texts.

It is my hope that students find the work of engaging with important questions around representation intellectually challenging and stimulating, as well as a lot of fun, and that it complicates and enriches their senses of

themselves as writers and as participants in the Social Sciences. We begin the course by reading and writing about the now well-established charge that representations of the Other employ imperialist methodologies and epistemologies; we examine Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa* through multiple rhetorical and political lenses as a liminal text that both broke new ethnographic ground but that also embodies some of the problems with ethnography. Students then choose any representation of the Other (in any medium) to analyze. The course ends with an invitation to students to create their own anti-imperialist mini-ethnographies, or, as I sometimes call them, "anti-ethnographies," since this project should not only embody students' careful chronicling and analysis of their ethnographic subjects, but also demonstrate their awareness of the difficulties and problems associated with writing about the Other, and their attempts to engage with and overcome these problems.

The last assignment is, needless to say, quite challenging. Some students find it paralyzing. By this point in the course, they have developed a fairly sophisticated critique of ethnographic methodologies and epistemologies, and have realized that there are no easy solutions to the problems. They readily acknowledge that ethnocentric bias undermines the scientific claims of much ethnography; but they also recognize, though often with regret, that bias is inevitable—so to simply say "I will write an unbiased ethnography" to counter the problems with conventional ethnography in fact creates more difficulties than it solves. Given that some postcolonial cultural critics like Trinh T. Minh-ha have suggested that anthropology as a discipline is by definition imperialist (*Woman*), aren't we setting ourselves up for inevitable failure as soon as we engage with this assignment? Shouldn't anthropology just be abolished in toto? Given the increasing problems with the ethnographic project, why engage in ethnography (or this course) at all? My response is that, first, ethnography will be done whether we want it to be done or not and whether we like the ethnographic work that is being done or not. I would rather my students (and others) intervene critically into the ethnographic enterprise than allow it to proceed unchallenged because their interventions might also be problematic. Second, I am not entirely convinced that ethnography as a discipline should be done away with. While the knowledges it produces in the context of Western representations of Others are seldom completely benign,[3] to abandon any efforts to learn about other cultures would doom the West to more of the kinds of ignorance and arrogance that the critiques of ethnography make painfully apparent. Third, I believe that the issues raised by the questions surrounding ethnography are interesting and important in and of themselves, and worthy of engaging because of their implications for discussions about knowledge, representation, and writing in general. Even if my students ultimately come to the conclusion that ethnography should be

abandoned, the process by which they come to this conclusion provides valuable opportunities for reflection on concerns pertinent to a host of disciplines and media, including writing.

How, then, to address the political, intellectual, and moral objections that have been made to the ethnographic project? Since the ethnographic gaze so often looks unidirectionally from first to third world, from power to powerless, wouldn't it behoove ethnographers to study the sources of power, rather than or as well as the subjects on whom that power is exercised? As Ralph Cintron puts it, "Metaphorically speaking, for every hour spent among the vulnerable, an hour needs to be spent in those sites that are, in part, responsible or complicit in the making of vulnerability" (940). But while the political imperative of Cintron's injunction is laudable, it also risks recapitulating some of the problems that critical ethnography seeks to redress: seeing the Other only as a function of and in terms of the dominant subject, and returning the focus to the seats of power when one of the purposes of ethnography is precisely to shift that focus in order to expand the researcher's and reader's horizons/understandings/sympathies. We can take Cintron's demand a step further: if, as some critics insist, anthropologists should avoid the power hierarchies and exoticizing impulses that inevitably accompany representations of the Other by studying their own cultures, should we all just write about ourselves? Wouldn't such an imperative foster the same kind of insular ethnocentrism that the abolition of ethnography might enable? And wouldn't it, as Linda Alcoff argues, act as a cover for a failure to engage in political activism? Alcoff writes,

> But a retreat from speaking for [others] will not result in an increase in receptive listening in all cases; it may result merely in a retreat into a narcissistic yuppie lifestyle in which a privileged person takes no responsibility whatsoever for her society. She may even feel justified in exploiting her privileged capacity for personal happiness at the expense of others on the grounds that she has no alternative.
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> The major problem with such a retreat is that it significantly undercuts the possibility of political effectivity. There are numerous examples of the practice of speaking for others that have been politically efficacious in advancing the needs of those spoken for, from Rigoberto Menchu to Edward Said and Steven Biko. . . . The point is not that for some speakers the danger of speaking for others does not arise, but that in some cases certain political effects can be garnered in no other way. (107)

Self-reflection on the part of the ethnographer has also been offered as a way to forestall uncritical assumptions of neutrality, but this, too, could be an easy and unsatisfactory flight from a much more complex problem: often writers who are now aware of the critiques of ethnography preface their work with a fashionable discussion of their methodology and location (class, race, gender, nationality, etc.), but then proceed as before; the self-reflexivity doesn't impact the ensuing ethnographic account. Bruce Horner notes in regard to this call for self-reflexivity from professional ethnographers, "precisely because they point to an ideal of academic professionalism, such calls tend to obscure the material social conditions of ethnographic work. As a result, what is intended as a cautionary practice can become a textually commodified guarantor of professional purity" (576). In the case of student writers, it is not so much that self-reflexivity is used to gain professional mileage but that it can, as with the case of the professionals, work to foreclose any further engagement with the problematics of ethnography—"we've covered that." A second problem with this type of meta-reflection is the possibility that the ethnographer becomes so taken up with this self-reflexivity that she becomes completely self-absorbed, producing an ethnography only about herself (a charge directed at Trinh T. Minh-ha in response to her groundbreaking documentary film, *Reassemblage*).

Of course, my students rise to the challenge of creating the seemingly impossible critical ethnographies that my final assignment requires. They use various multi-media technologies to reconceptualize the relationships among ethnographer, ethnographic subject, and their readers. In developing a variety of research and rhetorical strategies to document their subjects in inventive ways, the students sometimes produce more thoughtful ethnographies than those published by professionals in the field. Students have their ethnographic subjects write about their ethnographers as a way of suggesting that the ethnographer should be an object of scrutiny as much as her subjects. Students have their subjects interview one another in an attempt to circumvent the problematic power dynamics inherent in the ethnographer-subject relationship. Students insert all kinds of self-reflexive and other interventions into their ethnographies in order to interrogate their ethnographies while they create them. And students even create fictitious ethnographies as commentaries on the manipulations and fictions that necessarily characterize all ethnographies, and as satires of the reader's will to know the "truth" about the ethnographic subject, the reader's delusion that she is learning this truth through reading ethnography.

In one particularly ambitious multi-media project, Elizabeth Burkholder created a complex series of frames to contextualize and complicate her work. Burkholder's PowerPoint® slide show uses photographs and text to

"document" the school lives of a group of special education students she had been working with at a local public school. The piece begins with an Introduction setting out the author's goals for the work and retrospective insights on the project, then displays the photographs, each one containing a substantial narrative commentary that includes discussion of the process of taking the photograph (some photographs are accompanied by two pieces of commentary). The photographs are followed by a section entitled "Photographer's Choices," in which the author discusses her photographic method and techniques and the rationale for them as a way of demystifying the final products. The next section, "My Experiences," provides a narrative account of how the author came to undertake the project and its day-to-day execution, and is followed by a "Conclusion," a section entitled "Notes Looking Back," and, finally, a section called "My Failures." Among the many strategies Burkholder uses to fulfill the assignment's charge to address and embody critiques of ethnography, she resists the urge to deludedly suggest that her time with her subjects has made her "one of them" by repeatedly drawing attention to her outsider status and acknowledging her biases rather than trying to efface her presence (for instance, in the caption for the first photograph, she emphasizes her subjectivity and subjectiveness with the phrase, "This is one of my favorite photos"). In her "Conclusion," Burkholder even responds to Alcoff's concern about self-reflexive ethnographic work evacuating the political from its agendas by situating her project as an intervention into current social and political efforts to revise protocols for Special Education students in California public schools. In the "My Failures" section, she establishes her project as a moment in an ongoing process rather than as a finished and finite body of knowledge by pointing out its flaws and offering suggestions of how future work could be improved.

In the self-evaluations that the students turn in with their mini-ethnographies, they often reflect on the agonizing decisions they have to make or defer, and even explicitly offer their own work as critiques of other writing in the field. Kelly Fitzgerald, for instance, whose mini-ethnography treated a group of women living in a shelter for homeless women whom she taught as part of a service learning course at the university, reflected,

> I think the biggest strength of my paper is the way in which I included the women's handwriting in my paper. . . . I think it would be great for the *LA Times* to publish several papers/ stories/articles written on volunteers and their experiences just like I have—all the stories I have read are written in the point of view of the volunteer and include only very little info. on the person or group of people who are receiving the service.

While Fitzgerald's incorporation of her subjects' handwriting into her ethnography might be more problematically appropriative than the author suggests, she does destabilize the subject-object relation in her project in two ways. First, she questions her own ethnographic authority: in the introduction to her ethnography, she writes, "At times, I have been frustrated by my inability to make a difference in the lives of these women. I admit that sometimes I do not know all the answers. I often wonder if there is someone more qualified that could help these women—I'm just a student!" A second transgressive component to Fitzgerald's ethnography revolves around a discussion she and I had about the project, and her reflection on why she was so interested in writing about these women in the first place: she realized that her own father's homelessness many years ago had subconsciously compelled her work here. I urged her to write about this in the ethnography itself, which she agreed to do. Ultimately, she turns the ethnographic gaze upon herself.

     Another student, who requested that I not cite him by name, wrote his ethnography in the form of two voices, with the second voice critiquing the first one as a running commentary throughout. He discussed the implications of this strategy for readers in his self-evaluation of the paper:

> I think my main strength is my critique of my paper as my paper progresses. I tried to provide counterarguments to encourage the reader to challenge my views. The idea of encouraging the reader to disagree with me came to me while I was reading a letter from Michael Moore on common[dreams].org. He wrote that we should not be afraid to disagree or speak up. He uses his Oscar speech as an example.

By actually providing readers with a model by which to critique the author, this writer takes Fitzgerald's questioning of her own authority a step further. Such a degree of reader-author interaction, and the concomitantly radical provisionality of authorial authority is unheard of in conventional ethnographic writing. In what I would argue is an equally subversive conceptualization of ethnography, another student, who also requested to remain anonymous, wrote of his ethnography, "A high degree of subjectivity is intended, the inherent drawbacks of presenting the Other as an outsider are meant to be obvious. I question myself during the paper as I questioned myself thinking about the subject." To say that subjectivity is inevitable is one thing, but to imagine deploying one's subjectivity to draw attention to the limitations of the ethnographic project fundamentally redefines the purpose and status of ethnography. Here subjectivity, rather than a regrettable inevitability, is conceptualized as a

tool deployed to foreground the constructions of the text/author and to critique the ethnographic project. Ethnography becomes its own critique.

I don't want to posit my students' work as unproblematic, or present my course as a utopian political solution to the vexing questions around representation. Certainly the student work I have cited can be critiqued on various grounds. Certainly, many disappointing papers have been written in the course; many students have reverted to rehearsing the disciplinary, professional, pedagogical, social, and political axioms they have been taught and feel comfortable with; and I have struggled with the complexities and contradictions of the material and with my own discomfort with my changing definitions and understandings of the terms we treat.

Because this work, to a large extent, ventures into "uncharted territory," it has also prodded me into revising my paradigms of writing, teaching, and evaluation. Often I have found my own assumptions about students' writing and my own teacherly authority challenged and enriched. On one memorable occasion, I came to a whole-class writing workshop feeling confident that the student text under discussion, a collaborative critical ethnography about visitors to a local bar, lacked a "point" and needed more commentary from the writers. Each of the female and male co-writers described the same interactions among the bar-goers, but these interactions seemed routine to me, and the differences in the descriptions lacking significance. I listened to other class members talk about the piece's complexity and subtlety, the possibility that the differences between the two writers' perspectives might be explained in terms of gender, the equally plausible possibility that the differences in perspective had nothing to do with gender, and the even more interesting possibility that both kinds of "differences" might well be constructions of readers. As a result of this discussion, I completely altered my opinion, and confessed to the class that I had done so. I started to think of the piece as being as much about reading and readers as it was about the writers and their subjects. I now valued the elliptical elements in the project and thought of its lack of explicit focus as a strength rather than a failing. Other dilemmas and reversals plagued me. I even found myself worrying over exactly what constituted an "ethnography," since our dissections of the genre had made its boundaries so fuzzy that anything—or nothing—could be an ethnography.

In retrospect I see these pedagogical and intellectual crises as formative components of the projects we were all (teacher and students) undertaking rather than as impediments to the smooth running of syllabi and assignments or as reasons to abandon the work of ethnography or the teaching of ethnography. I believe that one of the values of this work with ethnography—for students and teachers—lies precisely in its grappling with these problems of definition and representation, in students and teachers experiencing the ways in which

writing—how they write something, and how they conceptualize writing about something—shapes meaning and understanding for them, their readers, and the subjects of their discourse.

These are not esoteric questions. A quick survey of US media and political representations of Iraqis preceding the latest US war against Iraq is ample evidence of one possible set of formative consequences of ethnographic writing—in this case, a horrifically reimagined ethnocentric arrogance and imperialist violence. A pedagogy that defines the ethnographic project broadly to include such media representations and their political deployments enables students not only to realize the political relevance of their academic study of ethnography but also to see the connections between writing and action. These understandings of the real material impact of ethnographic writing, in turn, inform students' reading of and participation in writing in their disciplines and in their larger social and political contexts. Once students realize the extent to which representations of the Other inform material reality, their own rhetorical work takes on added urgency. This, of course, is also a challenge to compositionists, writing teachers, and all teachers, to intervene into the ethnographic project as it is variously manifested in our cultures and curricula, and to conceptualize this intervention as a question of writing as much as it is a question of history, politics, and sociality.[4]

Notes

[1]Some of the now classic critiques of ethnography (though the degree of investment in conventional methodologies and epistemologies differs widely) include Clifford, Geertz, Hymes, and Marcus. For some examples of such work in composition scholarship, see Brown, Cintron, Himley, Horner, Kirklighter, and Welch. Brown's article begins with a helpful summary of the critiques of ethnography, and then goes on to critique the critiques. While Himley's essay does not provide any answers to the critiques, Himley does give an articulate overview of the problems of representation in the context of service learning.

[2] IRB standards also have a role to play in these conventions, of course. Ironically, in mandating procedures to assure research subjects' confidentiality, such standards collude in patronizing student writers when these writers are constructed as research subjects rather than as other authors.

[3] See Edward Said's *Orientalism* for one account of the uses to which imperialism puts supposedly disinterested scholarly production about the Other. The work of Said and Noam Chomsky has consistently chronicled the (sometimes unwitting) collusions between Western academia and Western imperialism.

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