Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography

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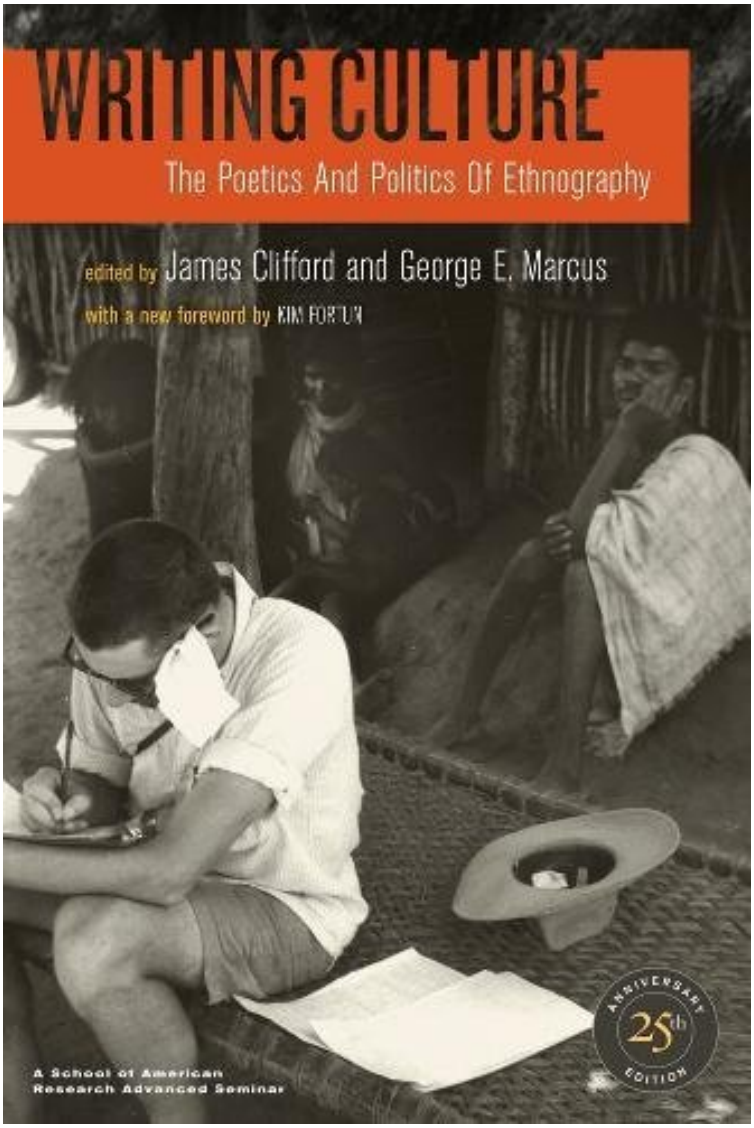

#595922 in Books imusti 2010-10-28Original language:EnglishPDF # 1 9.00 x 1.00 x 6.00l, .90 #File Name: 0520266021336 pagesUniversity of California Press | File size: 33.Mb

From imusti : Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography:

3 of 6 people found the following review helpful. Helpful but has a hard time walking its talkBy Angela M AndersonI read this book for my Activist Ethnography course in the Anthropology and Social Change program at CIIS. Several people in my class, especially those with literature backgrounds, saw hope in the book's promise of interdisciplinary ethnographic writings. Overall, I felt that the book failed most profoundly when it tried to heed its own advice. Worth the perspective, but I wouldn't spend too much time on it.11 of 11 people found the following review helpful. A

French Reading of A Classic in Cultural AnthropologyBy Etienne RPThe distinction between science and the humanities has evolved over the course of history. Their perimeter has fluctuated: men of science used to be men of letters. In the nineteenth century, the constitution of a "science of man" robbed literature of its traditional object: moral philosophy, or the painting of man in all his social, cultural and psychological aspects. The relationship between science and literature is the story of a gradual encroachment, expropriation and conquest. Sociology and the other social sciences constituted themselves at the turn of the twentieth century by affirming a radical departure from literature. In a spirit of compromise, a great divide was offered. The qualities eliminated from science were localized in the category of "literature". On the side of literature, scientists conceded the domain of the imagination, the power of eloquence, the spirit of witticism and the pleasures of aestheticism. On the side of science, mirror qualities prevailed: observation, precision, rigor, and expertise.The division between anthropology (the "science of man") and literature was never so clear-cut, however. In France, ethnographers prided themselves of their literary talent, and often wrote a "second book" in addition to their ethnographic account from fieldwork experience. This "literary supplement" to the voyage of the ethnographer was particularly developed as a genre in the first half of the twentieth century. One needs only to mention L'Afrique fantme by Michel Leiris (published in 1934), Les Flambeurs d'hommes set by Marcel Griaule on the Ethiopian highlands (1934), Mexique, terre indienne by Jacques Soustelle (1936) and, of course, Tristes Tropiques by Claude Lvi-Strauss, first published by Collection Terre humaine in 1955. [For readers who master the French language: Vincent Debaene, a literary historian, has recently published a book, L'Adieu au voyage, surveying the genre and putting it into context. I am borrowing many ideas in this review from his book].In the same period, there was a rich dialogue between anthropology and the literary avant-garde. The Surralistes were enthralled by primitive cultures, and actively supported the establishment of the first exhibitions and museal displays of ethnological artifacts. A generation later, under the guise of structuralism, literary criticism borrowed massively from anthropology. Roland Barthes patrolled the literary field under the influence of Claude Lvi-Strauss, and claimed to abolish the difference between primary and secondary material, between the text and its commentary. Very often these borrowings were based on misreadings and semantic analogies, and Lvi-Strauss himself resented the use of science as a metaphor, a theme Bricmont and Sokal would later exploit by fueling the "science wars". But the important point here is not whether references to anthropology and structuralism were accurate: even misunderstandings and deformations can be productive if they generate new questionings and new modes of writing.This long history of dialogue, borrowings, and confrontation between literature and anthropology in France may explain why Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography was never translated into French (a quick search shows the book is available in German, in Spanish, in Italian, in Japanese and in Chinese). This volume, edited by James Clifford and Georges Marcus and published in 1986, has achieved iconic status in the English-speaking world. Like the publication of The Interpretation of Cultures by Clifford Geertz a decade earlier, one may speak of ethnographic style before and after Writing Culture. One of the editors even publishes about every decade a follow-up paper pondering the legacy of his own book. For the French (and this may sound preposterous, but so it is), this is dj vu all over again: we didn't have to wait for Writing Culture in order to witness the "coming of a literary consciousness to ethnography" (Marcus), or to highlight "the constructed, artificial nature of cultural accounts" (Clifford). Pierre Bourdieu, perhaps thinking of Clifford Geertz, derided the whole effort as "textism".In spite of all this, French social scientists should do well to read Writing Culture, if only to reclaim their heritage and confront French thought with its own radicalism. After all, Clifford Geertz and James Clifford made ample borrowings from "French theory", and under the "textual turn" one can easily detect the influences of Paul Ricoeur, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida or Michel Foucault. As Paul Rabinow notes in his contribution, ideas often circulate with a twenty years' time lag. "The moment when the historical profession is discovering cultural anthropology in the (unrepresentative) person of Clifford Geertz is just the moment when Geertz is being questioned in anthropology. So, too, anthropologists, or some of them in any case, are now discovering and being moved to new creations by the infusion of ideas from deconstructionist literary criticism, now that it has lost its cultural energy in literature departments," writes Rabinow, who could also have added that he wrote his Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco, a highly self-reflexive and literary text, twenty years after Lvi-Strauss' Tristes Tropiques.So what should one retain from Writing Culture? First, a willingness to experiment with new writing techniques and non-conventional forms. One of the reasons French anthropologists wrote a literary account of their fieldwork was because they felt constrained by the codes and conventions of academic writing. Likewise, Malinowski vented in his field diaries all the frustration, anger, and subjective feelings that could not make way in his ethnographic writings. As Clifford notes, "Sapir and Benedict had, after all, to hide their poetry from the scientific gaze of Franz Boas" (Clifford Geertz, on the other hand, didn't need to hide his literary musings, and often referred to both classical and contemporary poetry in his texts.) Writing Culture enthusiastically advocated experimental forms of writing, and offered some samples of what a postmodern ethnography could look like. True to form, some essays are not very convincing, and are not that revolutionary in stylistic terms in the first place. But new writing techniques matured, as evidenced by the evolution between Vincent Crapanzino's contribution to this volume, a confused tract with no clear intent except to smear Clifford Geertz's reputation, and his recently published The Harkis: The Wound That Never Heals, a beautifully written and deeply

moving book which I shall review on this website.The second lasting contribution of Writing Culture is the recommendation given to ethnographers to pay attention not only to what they write, but how they write as well. The anthropologist spends more time in his university office, writing papers, than in the field, doing participatory observation--and even there, field notes, diary entries, and communicating through diagrams or lists of words are an important part of fieldwork. "No longer a marginal, or occulted, dimension, writing has emerged as central to what anthropologists do both in the field and thereafter," writes James Clifford. This concern with the "anthropologist as author" was also shared by Clifford Geertz, who is criticized by several contributors to Writing Culture but should really be seen as the father of this whole enterprise. Attention to text and to discourse drove anthropology closer to other disciplines, from literary criticism and cultural studies to postmodern philosophy. The focus on the writing process also led to a renewed interest in the marginalia of ethnographic fieldwork. The published monograph leaves aside many written materials, from field notes to archival documents, that have contributed to its makeup and that could be of interest to the readers. The archives of famous anthropologists were laid open, and the publication of Bronislaw Malinowski's personal diary in 1967 led to a complete reassessment of the teachings of one of the founders of the discipline.Thirdly, Writing Culture contributed to the rethinking of fieldwork methods and a new emphasis on the political dimension of ethnography that came in the 1970s and 1980s. As Clifford writes, "anthropology no longer speaks with automatic authority for others defined as unable to speak for themselves." Informants and field collaborators were treated as co-authors with a voice of their own. By questioning modes of authority and discursive strategies in ethnography, modern anthropologists emphasized the dialogic dimension of fieldwork and introduced a multiplicity of voices and perspectives in their texts. Clearly, there was a lot of wishful thinking and political correctness in the call to abolish the divide between the discourse of the native and the meta-language of science, between the observer and the observed. Likewise, the denunciation of Clifford Geertz's political aloofness and ironical distance from the ideological causes of the day may have been inspired more by campus politics than by a sincere effort to empower the disenfranchised. But the idea that anthropology can help provide our multicultural societies with a code of ethics or a moral compass seems to me the best justification for the pursuit and advancement of a "science of man".

This seminal collection of essays critiquing ethnography as literature is augmented with a new foreword by Kim Fortun, exploring the ways in which Writing Culture has changed the face of ethnography over the last 25 years.