Challenging Audiences: Critical Ethnography in/for Oceania

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The key thread I use to weave these contributions together is the politics of reception (or ‘audience’). Consequently, I invite readers to treat my contribution (somewhat unconventionally) more as a sample reading than as the collection’s conclusion. Following this thread, I hope to encourage you to resist approaching the foregoing arguments as separate and self-contained. Much is gained by ‘reading across’, whether or not an author makes reference to the others. A contribution’s explicit citations are only one of its inevitably sociable frames of reference (reflecting, perhaps, its author’s more conscious concerns). Other frames also influence readers’ interpretations. Clearly, the editors’ arrangement of the articles highlights particular relationships among them that might otherwise pass unremarked. But readers also bring interests and experiences to bear that authors and editors cannot anticipate. In any event, while persuasive readings are by no means ‘free’, they are underdetermined by particular authors’ intentions.

I first survey the sense of critical ethnography in/for Oceania that informed my response to the papers when they were presented at meetings of the Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania and when I read them together for this collection. The second and third sections suggest what I gleaned from reading across.

Critical Ethnography: Making Reflexivity Ethnographic and Political

While much of anthropology can be viewed as critical insofar as the discipline’s field-based ‘translation of cultures’ unsettles commonsense and homegrown (most often Euro-American) assumptions, a distinctive ‘critical anthropology’ dates from the 1960s and 1970s (see, among many others, Diamond 1964 and generally Marcus and Fischer 1986). Critical anthropology’s several early variants sought a political impact by exposing the contexts of archetypical field research: e.g., ambivalent histories of colonialism (Asad 1973; Diamond 1974; Hymes 1974) and gendered perspectives (Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974; Reiter 1975). By moving ethnographic context from the margins and background into focus, critical anthropology transformed it into
properly ethnographic content, subject to the same unsettling scrutiny as other sociocultural practices. In its elaborated forms, this refocused perspective brings into view the conditions of possibility of anthropological and other kinds of expertise through which we claim to know and act in/on the world.\(^3\)

Over the past 40 years, our emphases have shifted. The original intensity of self-criticism in critical anthropology abated as the discipline’s definitions of proper ethnographic content expanded (notably beginning a revaluation of work ‘at home’, both in the West and elsewhere). Not unexpectedly, while the successes of early anti-colonial and feminist challenges strengthened the discipline in significant ways, they were enabled by off-camera conditions of their own: poorly glimpsed shifts in the sources, relations and methods for producing ethnography. Recently, as the editors’ introduction and some other contributions to this collection illustrate, we have been less troubled by internal self-criticism than external (cross-disciplinary or non-academic) critique, some of which helps illuminate those off-camera conditions.\(^4\)

That was one of Rolph Trouillot’s (1991) main arguments concerning anthropology’s marginality (the ‘savage slot’ to which Carucci and Dominy refer). Trouillot sought to reframe anthropology’s internal controversies about identity and direction within a larger history of ‘the West’. His ‘prehistory of the discipline’ complemented reflexive anthropological analysis of its own practices by historicizing the discipline’s position in the academic division of labor.

This collection complements some 1990s reactions (e.g., Fox 1992; Harrison 1997) to the best known recent sources for critical anthropology: e.g., key 1986 writings associated with George Marcus and James Clifford, which are often viewed as ‘textualist’ and linked to the cross-disciplinary influence of Cultural Studies. The foregoing articles converge in surprising ways with Critical anthropology now (Marcus 1999, which has sharp observations about how the 1980s contributions have been read) as well as other contributions to a publicly engaged anthropology (e.g., Basch 1999; Field 1999). Critical anthropology now reaffirms and enacts a commitment to ethnography by extending the critical project. Its contributors open up perspectives on the contexts of recent ethnographic work on, e.g., American public culture, corporations and the sciences. They explore conditions of research that—insofar as central Western institutions and culturally influential persons are involved—have only recently been deemed ‘anthropological’. Methodologically, as in other home-based fieldwork (for example, Tengan, Goldsmith or Feinberg in this issue) but in contrast to more conventionally located ethnography, the authors are more sharply aware that some of their observations derive from opportunities seized in the midst of events (rather than from planned research). Following arguments for ‘multi-sited’ fieldwork (Marcus 1995), these authors view their topics as spatially and socially complex, and have become more conscious of conflicts of interest and complicities akin to those raised by doing native anthropology, although with different avenues for their resolution.\(^5\)

In summary, the critical effort to make reflexivity ethnographic and political, rather than simply literary or autobiographical, has been a generational project.
Beginning over 40 years ago, and shifting its emphasis from internal self-criticism (not itself taken as ‘proper anthropology’) to productively substantive matters—drawing lessons equally for anthropology and its objects concerning subject positions and media of representation, historical experience and world-system relations—critical anthropology is transforming the discipline.

**Critical Ethnography in/for Oceania**

There is an Oceanic current in these articles’ contributions to this by-now-familiar style of ethnographic practice.

As suggested above, critical attention has supported a reevaluation, within the discipline, of work at home. This has meant gradually according greater visibility to the politics of research practice conducted, on one hand, by Western anthropologists in Europe and the USA (e.g., Jones 1970; Gwaltney 1976; Messerschmidt 1981) and, on the other hand, by scholars from other parts of the world in their own home regions (e.g., Srivinas 1966). In both cases, as noted, critical anthropology renovates work at home by deploying reflexivity in ethnographically substantive, politically attuned ways. Both at home and away, self-reference is a key resource in the foregoing articles for using the strengths and limitations of field research to illuminate socially complex circumstances.

Advocating a critical Pacific ethnography (as these articles do) suggests, firstly, that anthropological practice has become irretrievably global: not only its subject matter, but also its institutions, practitioners, audiences and the rest, are everywhere. Consequently, the identities and interests of ethnographic researcher-writers and their academic, public and personal universes converge and diverge more complexly and unpredictably than ever. This has implications for reception. My title aims to focus attention on one implication—the reciprocal challenge of/to Oceanic anthropology to/of its audiences—since dilemmas of reception (both before and after writing) are central to the articles collected here (see the next two sections below).

But advocating a critical ethnography in and for Oceania also suggests something distinctive. For non-anthropologists in the West (as within anthropology) the idea of ‘the Pacific’ has long represented an especially anthropological object. This idea has encompassed hopes and fears associated with the discipline as a whole. On one hand, it stands for the distinctive value anthropology has conventionally offered: e.g., a productive disorientation of Western cultural presuppositions. On the other hand, this idea also represents the discipline’s erstwhile marginality, its sometime relegation to what was left over in the division of academic labor: the discipline’s ‘savage slot’ is that which history, sociology and economics ignore. In a complementary fashion, among regional scholars and in Oceanic public discourse, the idea of ‘anthropology’ encompasses contradictory values. As Carucci and Dominy emphasize, some of the sharpest conflicts over anthropological knowledge have occurred in Oceanic public and academic discourse (Hanlon 2000). At the same time, key Pacific area intellectuals identify with anthropology, drawing on it in everything from fiction
writing to policy making (Hau’ofa 1994). Because anthropology and Oceania have historically been so complexly implicated in one another, critical ethnography in/for Oceania promises ramifying effects.

**Reading Across the Articles (Generally): Challenging Audiences**

While all the articles collected here foreground the contexts of strictly ethnographic work, I was struck, in particular, by their common concern with the politics of reception (understanding this phrase to refer to active processes and agents). The authors assess ethnography by considering how it has been used (or not) rather than by seeking to pin down its essential qualities. The articles attend to transformations, over the past generation, in the circulation of anthropological work: the bases for assessing ethnography have been destabilized as its audiences have shifted and as distinctions have been erased between home, field, school and affinity group (family, informants, colleagues and political allies).

This focus on reception is relatively fresh in anthropology (see, e.g., Brettell 1993). Critical anthropology from the 1960s through the 1980s focused less on consumption than on the production end of our practice. That is, it focused on the sociohistorical contexts, topical foci and experience of fieldwork, and on ethnographic poetics (especially in relation to ethnography’s marked and unmarked alternatives). Certainly, reception has not been ignored; most of us recognize the contextual challenges of effective communication. Family hearthside stories are different from interdisciplinary seminar discussions: we distinguish popular and specialist contexts, not to mention varieties of expertise within and between disciplines. Nevertheless, our attention to reception has so far been mostly unreflective and pragmatic; consequently, we still rely on conceptual distinctions that no longer work so well. Perhaps the most important is that between cultural insider and outsider.

The inside/outside distinction is tightly woven into twentieth-century concepts of distinctively anthropological expertise. Unlike in sociology—a discipline in which researchers are (conventionally) situated either outside (DeVries 2004) or inside (Ellis 1991) their subject matter—in anthropology, ethnographic knowledge is (conventionally) made in a reciprocal tension between the two (e.g., Geertz 1990; Lederman 1990). Conventionally, this tension linked an experiential effort of locating oneself somewhere to get a first-hand sense of what is going on through long-term social engagement with particular people and an interpretive effort of translating ones hosts’ concerns and concepts for readers and other audiences unlikely to encounter them directly. Inside/outside worked pretty well as shorthand for this reciprocal tension: it implied an appreciation for both differences and similarities among human circumstances, an acknowledgment of the relativity of expertise, and interplay between engagement (commitment) and distance (critique).

But as illustrated by Paige West’s account of how memory and sociable attentiveness bring here and there together (her ‘here/there’), the distinctions seem to be collapsing these days even in apparently conventional field situations. In
politically marked circumstances, the collapse may be extreme—a function of the multiplicity of identities and interests bearing on fieldworkers and their interlocutors—even as invocations of ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ (and their variants) still have power to make social claims on persons. For example, Ty Tengan explores one way in which the insider/outsider relation implodes when the ‘Native’ is the ‘anthropologist’. While he considered choosing between them neither personally possible nor desirable, choices were nevertheless imposed on him by others (a constraint echoed in Heather Young Leslie’s account of Tongan medical students). How might native anthropologists relocate a critical edge? Are their efforts necessarily different from those of scholars, like Les Field (1999), Rayna Rapp (2000) or contributors to Critical anthropology now doing research in California or New York on similarly conflictual, mutually engaged (but differently positioned) populations? In all these cases, ambivalently ‘insider’-anthropologists do not retain the illusions of control over their subject positions that ‘outsiders’ have conventionally enjoyed (although, of course, neither one is free). They do not determine when, exactly, their actions are ‘research’, ‘advocacy’, ‘teaching’ or ‘living their lives’.

By focusing on how their work is received or used, this issue’s articles help us explore alternatives to the inside/outside tension in constituting the distinctive anthropological contribution. They also illustrate the non-anthropological, non-academic contributions that ethnography enables. Considering diverse bases on which we can claim an effective voice, the articles help us to articulate and temper academic visions of power. Exposing the limitations of ethnography, they enable us to recognize that other partially overlapping practices, subject positions and relations are critical: e.g., compare Tengan, Petersen and West for partial connections between the personal and the ethnographic; or Feinberg, Goldsmith and Meijl for ways in which politics and the ethnographic; or Feinberg, Goldsmith and Meijl for ways in which politics and scholarship converge.

Which is to say, while it is undeniably broad, anthropology has never been about everything or for everyone. No knowledge practice should expect to be. We all read and judge children’s books and technical manuals differently, and would not normally take a dictionary to task for having a weak plot nor criticize a novel for lacking an index (unless we had misconstrued the genre). But something like this has been going on with respect to ‘ethnography’.

All was well so long as we were primarily writing for a relatively narrow, ‘disciplined’ audience of fellow anthropologists. Writing for and reading one another, we can assume quite a bit about acceptable interpretive and evaluative framings even when we disagree with one another.

Recently, however, it has become difficult—not to mention inadequate—to insulate ethnography from ‘undisciplined’ readings. Whether we seek them out (as in politically engaged scholarship like Tengan’s) or not, increasingly diverse communities have expectations and make demands that affect our writing, the conduct of research and other interventions. They include various elites (e.g., funders, policymakers), practitioners, political activists and other publics not to mention academic colleagues—all of whom are increasingly likely to be our informants as well, with at
least partial access of their own to the phenomena we write about. Articles in this collection respond in various ways.

Reading Across the Articles (Specifically): Overlapping Engagements

As I read this collection, Laurence Carucci and Michèle Dominy have arranged the articles so as to highlight differences: different positioning in, and responses to, the politics of indigeneity (Goldsmith, Tengan, Meijl), divergent ways of enacting a critical stance and construing social commitment (Harrington, West, Young Leslie), and contrastive arguments about the importance of anthropology (Feinberg, Petersen). Here, I look for affinities.

Carucci and Dominy open the collection with an account of its motivation. Hoping to contribute ethnographically to a productive critique, anthropological participants in an interdisciplinary National Endowment for the Humanities seminar found themselves, their disciplinary project and products ‘othered’ instead: facing a challenging audience rather than joining the challenge. They wondered how to respond. One possible response is suggested in Toon van Meijl’s effort to distinguish the ethnographer’s interests from those of his interlocutors in Aotearoa New Zealand. But Michael Goldsmith’s analysis can stand as a caution concerning ways distinctively anthropological categories like ‘culture’ may be adopted and adapted for public use. Centering himself in a version of a distinctively ethnographic project, Richard Feinberg describes activities, both in Oceania and at home in Ohio, that he construes as deploying his Anutan-honed ethnographic expertise pragmatically. Rejecting a certain concept of distinctiveness, Christy Harrington and Glenn Petersen offer contrastive perspectives on ethnographic practice that qualify its value while preserving its political potential to support islander interests. But these perspectives converge, perhaps unexpectedly, with the linchpin of Meijl’s argument. This central point (captured by his trickster image) is that specifically ethnographic positionality—partially resisting or supporting the demands of (some, many, but not all) interlocutor/sponsors—is all about contradiction and ambiguity (a point West appears to qualify by collapsing here/there in her construct of ethnographic sociality).

Petersen both desires and fears that his ethnography be found useful (which ambivalence acknowledges the opposed interests of his potential audiences). He offers an example of being read but discounted; Harrington provides a case of inadvertent publicity while Tengan and Feinberg tell encouraging tales of local effectiveness. Goldsmith focuses on the ambiguous resonance of the ‘culture’ category whereas Tengan and Meijl, each in his own way, raise important questions about significant differences of interest (in all senses) among native interlocutors. Tengan’s emphasis on the hybridity and situatedness of indigeneity is particularly striking for, among other things, its implications for how ethnography might be received in his communities.

A related question is how we respond to these differences in reception: in the accessibility of our work and its impacts. One answer is suggested in Meijl’s analysis
of differences between Maori leaders and Maori youth. In effect, he answers Petersen’s question (‘important to whom?’) by asserting critical ethnography’s responsibility to give an account of the more or less politicized disjunctures within our field communities. In this case, such an apparently more comprehensive account might sit askew Maori official interests while reinforcing the voices of young people. Young Leslie’s historical account also illuminates critical disjunctures between Tongan doctors and colonial administrators by focusing on apparent anomalies: the promising medical student’s expulsion, the progressive administrator’s racism. We are challenged to work out the mutual implications.

Petersen’s answer appears contrary to Meijl’s insofar as it may have been strategically bad to emphasize intra-Pohnpeian differences. The same may be said for Tengan and Harrington: where identities are explicitly politicized (and, with them, the ethnographer/teacher’s sense of purpose and audience), one cannot just present ‘all the facts’: something other than accuracy is at issue.

From one perspective, Feinberg’s account of campus politics stands apart in a way that bears comment. Even though he writes in the first person about situations of conflict, the article reads as both an outsider’s commentary on and—as if the audience were as much local (Kent State) as Oceanic—an insider’s enactment of conciliation. But from another perspective, Feinberg’s account is like Tengan’s (despite differences in voice and circumstance) since both appear constrained by an ongoing sense of active responsibility (or kuleana in Tengan’s sense). Several of the others adopt an unapologetically confessional voice, more explicit about the choices involved when one recognizes contradictory interests and understandings within and between communities that one cares about, and at the same time participates actively with them, taking a stand to further some social project. Both Feinberg and Petersen see a grounded understanding of people’s circumstances as enabling this.

‘Last Words’

Goldsmith and Tengan, from complementary subject positions, comment explicitly on both the disabilities and insights afforded by not being able to withdraw. In this way, they contrast, partially, with Meijl’s and West’s articles and converge, partially, with those of Harrington, Young Leslie, Petersen and Feinberg. Working together to paint a complex picture of constraints on ethnographic practice, the articles make visible the contingencies and instabilities of effective social action.

Perhaps because of the emphasis on literary form and the production of ethnography over the past couple of decades, we have become too used to viewing our practices in terms of choice. George Marcus and others have drawn attention to literary devices (among other things) to urge productive consideration of the substantive messages tacitly carried by our key medium. Whether or not we have changed our ways of writing, at the very least we are now more conscious of the styles we use and aware of the importance of both making implicit choices explicit and facing our responsibility for them.
Against this influential background, Tengan’s article acts as an effective check on the temptation to overemphasize choice. Along with several other contributors, he gets across the inescapability of social identity and history read into our located bodies, our mostly monolingual writings, and other situated specificities by those who encounter our work. That is, serious attention to the reception both of our field presence and of our writing reveals the limits of control. Any person ‘passing’ can be outed or rerouted. Any ‘insider’ can be othered. And most of us have versions of that classic experience of being familiarized and already either incorporated or excluded even when we have only just arrived. ‘Critical ethnography’ recognizes and explores these slippery constraints with an interest in finding a footing for meaningful action.

In calm moments, we might all admit that being reappropriated is both an unavoidable disability of authorship and its deepest desire. The uncertainty of public effect is exactly why the critical project is important. Critical ethnography enables us to perceive the positional relations defining a specifically anthropological expertise in particular worldly circumstances. Deflating fantasies of having an encompassing last word—everywhere, for everyone, simply as ethnographic writers—critical projects sharpen the political value (usefulness, effectiveness, impact) of ethnographic practice. If this last contribution has done its critical job, it will not be read ‘conclusively’ but, one reading among others, will provoke you to (re)turn to the foregoing contributions, reading across their cross-purposes and convergences for leads in your own work.

Notes

[1] An excerpt from Lederman (1998) focusing on the ‘savage slot’ problem was my contribution to the 2000 ASAO working session on Critical Ethnography organized by Laurence Carucci and Michele Dominy; the present article is a revision of my discussant commentary for the 2001 installment of that session.

[2] Although not often considered part of ‘critical ethnography’, the large literature of first-person descriptions of field experiences helps reveal the limitations and enabling conditions of ethnographic insight even when it has no overtly political aims.

[3] Insofar as it helps clarify the background conditions for forms of expertise, critical anthropology converges with social studies of knowledge (e.g., Foucault 1972; Messer-Davidow, Shunway and Sylvan 1993; Rowe 1998).

[4] Of course, as Petersen’s reference to Deloria (this issue) reminds us, external criticisms have long been with us. While it is an important and potentially productive motivation, anthropologists’ feeling of being under fire presently is, however, somewhat ironic. At the same time as it confronts longstanding stereotypes, these days anthropology is quite influential across the disciplines. Moreover, it has an arguably more positive and nuanced public profile than it had in the past (for leads, see discussion and references in Lederman 2005).

[5] Conventional anthropological fieldwork also involved seizing unplanned opportunities and being situated in compromised positions. The difference, nowadays, is that we are foregrounding and scrutinizing these conditions.

[6] The goals of a critical anthropology in ‘native’ and in ‘repatriated’ anthropologies, both home-work, may differ in ways suggested here if one compares Tengan and Feinberg (my use
of quote marks is meant to acknowledge the contested character of terms within and across these literatures). Historically, they also overlap significantly, particularly in the innovative work of African American anthropologists (e.g., Jones 1970; Gwaltney 1976, 1981). Clearly, not all ‘native’ anthropology is political in the sense many critical anthropologists mean it: ‘applied’ and ‘practicing’ anthropologists have often worked at home without remarking on their location. Since Franz Boas’s collaboration with George Hunt, anthropologists have also a history of facilitating ethnographic and autobiographical production on the part of their interlocutors (e.g., Bernard and Salinas 1989; see Wolcott 1999, 146–56).

[7] By ‘effective’ communication—which has to do with the fit between a communicator’s aims and outcomes—I acknowledge issues raised both by Clifford (ethnographic ‘authority’) and Petersen (ethnographic ‘competence’) insofar as that distinction turns on the bases of our judgments about ethnography. As I suggest, if we can no longer assume neat distinctions between communities ‘in’ the field and ‘out’, we can no longer presume neatly distinguishable standards for believing, acting on, ignoring or disapproving ethnographic work. The articles collected here reveal some of the multiple standards at play within and between relevant communities.

References


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