

Drinkers, Drummers, and Decent Folk

Ethnographic Narratives of Village Trinidad

John O. Stewart

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of Village Trinidad*

JOHN O. STEWART

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Foreword: Hermeneutics and the Anthropology of Fiction

ROBERT A. MANNERS

John Stewart's warrant to record and delineate life in rural Trinidad was established initially by birth and direct experience, later confirmed, elaborated and contextualized through years of post-graduate study and anthropological field work in the area. The format he has designed for this collection represents his desire to enrich ethnographic exposition by joining it to storytelling without either blurring or concealing the line of demarcation between the two. Thus the notes and commentaries (*Who's Speaking Here?*, etc.) have been designed to draw attention to the "general concerns of the work, and the process of its construction" (from Stewart's Abstract). Although fictional techniques and the "selected field notes and commentaries" cohabit within the covers of this stunning volume, each retains its own formal identity as it offers telling testimony to the value of the symbiosis. Other ethnographers before Stewart have told stories, either as recounted to them by informants or as experienced by them personally. But the latter have sometimes been so ruthlessly blended into the general ethnographic account that one cannot know where interpretive projection and imagination let off and so-called positivism/empiricism begins.

The artistry of Stewart's "invention" is that it allows him to tell us something about Caribbean "realities" as his life, training, talent and creativity reveal these "realities" to him. But he does not offer the stories as factual history, only as the product of insights permitted him by his gifts and his experience. The anthropological cement that helps to explain and is in turn explained by his fictions is supplied in the aforementioned fieldnotes and commentaries.

In the best of all possible worlds the anthropologist and the writer of fiction are one, *but write as two*. In his role as anthropologist he may make the leap that carries him through and beyond his ethnographic data to the creation of an hypothesis or a theory. He may not, however, invent either the ethnography or the characters portrayed, for this is a privilege reserved to the writer of fiction.

During the past ten or twenty years, anthropology and its variously certified practitioners have been marching off in many different directions. Democracy of interpretation — in all likelihood the genetically disordered offspring of cultural relativism — is the current mode. Expertise is not only irrelevant, it has become a hindrance to the free exercise of imagination. Any opinion, perception, analysis, interpretation or explanation of cultural phenomena, as Raymond Firth has observed, is about as good as any other.¹

However, for anthropologists outside this adventurous company

Social Anthropology is not just an exercise in speculative reasoning. It is about the actions and thoughts of people. . . . So when any statement is made about such actions and thoughts, a very proper question is, what is the nature of the evidence? . . . I think it of prime importance that generalizations about thought and behavior should clearly indicate the evidence on which they are based in 'empirical' terms, with attention to source, frequency, systematic distribution and logical coherence . . . generalizations must relate at some point to *what* who said and did where, when and how. (Firth, *Ibid.*, emphasis in original).

While all generalization involves a creative leap from observed data to synthesis/hypothesis/theory, many of the new ethnographers have discovered that their data may impose unwelcome restraints on creativity. And since they are undeterred by any compulsion to let us know how they got to here from there, they leap over tall buildings at a single bound, allowing falsifiability to take unassailable refuge

inside their heads. Adherents of Karl Popper may shudder, but the poetic exercise of explanation by intuition and the esoteric manipulation of symbols multiplies. Sometimes it makes for fun reading, but to many anthropologists the Popperian touchstone still seems to matter.

It may be that the most reasonable explanation for this frenzied departure from the more traditional kinds of hypothesizing has to do with the long-apparent inadequacy of monocausal or other simplistic kinds of explanation. Or, to put it another way, to the near infinitude of variables, of somatic and extrasomatic influences at work in the making, unmaking and preserving of cultural forms and institutions.

Or, on the other hand, as suggested approvingly by Richard Shweder (*New York Times Book Review*, September 21, 1936), the ethnographer-home-from-the-field must "figure out which point of view will have the greatest impact on [his/her] audience. . . . That is why the retelling is often better than the original experience. Unburdened of the small truths of positive science, the tale grows tall. The idea is that the best way to write a compelling ethnography is to lose your field notes." Better, perhaps, one might add, not to take any field notes. And if one should be so carelessly conventional as to have done so, still better to destroy them before one sits down to write. After all, every ethnography, no matter how scrupulously researched, organized and presented, is in some respects inexact. Now, it seems, inexactitude may be self-consciously elevated to new heights in the creation of ethnographies of imagination. "I've got to come back and tell a consistent and entertaining story about what the 'whoever's' are like and everything they do had better fit this one story.'" (Paul Kay, as "semi-seriously" quoted by Shweder).

Paul Rabinow ("Humanism as Nihilism: The Bracketing of Truth and Seriousness in American Cultural Anthropology," in *Social Science as Moral Inquiry*, N. Hahn, R. Bellah, P. Rabinow and W. Sullivan, eds., New York, Columbia University Press. 1983.p.66), citing Clifford Geertz, notes that: "The essential vocation of interpretive anthropology is not to answer our deepest questions but to make available to us answers that others . . . have given and thus to include them in the consultable record of what man has said." Nothing new here. Rabinow adds: "The point is to enter into the imaginative universe of others, to *construct fictions* about these cultures

and thereby extend the range of human discourse. The task of anthropology is to . . . return home and construct an account, to preserve their culture for the historical record" (Emphasis added).

Or, one might add, to trade whatever feeble claims to science our discipline may have for an ethnographic Tower of Babel. What kind of "historical record" would be preserved? Thus, Albert Spaulding remarks somewhat apprehensively that the "recent interest in explicitly nonscientific humanistic anthropology, including . . . hermeneutics, reflexive and critical anthropology" threatens to leave only "prehistoric archaeology as the sole relic of traditional scientific anthropology." (*Anthropology Newsletter*, October, 1987).

The irony is that in all of the flood of post-modernist, deconstructionist, anything-goes accounts there is an obvious attempt to compensate for the generally dessicated character of ordinary field ethnographies. Unfortunately for the rest of us and for that part of the reading public who are drawn to the product by the enchanting payoff — how the so-and-so people *really* are, packaged in a "good read" — these free-swinging efforts to provide "deeper understandings, insights and explanations" get validated by the professional credentials of their creators. In short, while many of the new ethnographers may be appropriately modest in their claims, they do speak and write as *anthropologists*. Consequently, their exegeses, no matter how detached these may be from "evidence," gain a measure of scientific respectability through their structured inclusion in "an anthropological study."

On the other hand, the writer of fiction observes only the constraints imposed upon him by his imagination and his determination either to create, embellish or adhere to the truth as he sees it. He, unlike the anthropologist in the field, can indeed get inside the minds of his creations. For they are his mind. In short, the anthropologist must be guided to his conclusions by the evidence, constrained by his observations and his disciplined deductions from these observations. When he leaps from these into the minds of his *real people*, he is trespassing on the territory of the writers of fiction — but willy-nilly sheathed in the exalted mantle of "science."

The novelist or writer of short stories may invent both setting and character. Verisimilitude constrains him only to the degree that he wishes his fictive universe to be as real, as internally consistent or believable as the story demands. Even those anthropologists who

write science fiction are generally careful to maintain “believability” and “internal consistency” in their work. When they are not dabbling in the future or mucking around in some remote galaxy, they will try to yoke a familiar habitat to characters and situations synthesized from fact and fancy. When they get inside the heads and hearts of their creations, they have, as it were, permission to do so, a permission granted by their role as writer of fiction. Were they to commit the same kind of intrusion in a fieldwork monograph, we would be justified in saying: “How do you know?” While such untoward intrusions may provide sharp and even compelling insights, it is the guise or framework in which they are offered that triggers one’s resistance.

In his essay on “Post-Modernism and the Fictive Mode,” Stewart wrestles with the central problem of “incompleteness” in the traditional ethnographic monograph. He tells us that he paid his debt to his examiners and to the anthropological part of his being when he wrote and submitted his thesis for the degree. Since then, he says: “I write stories.”

But it is our good fortune that Stewart’s background and talent have lodged him (rather comfortably, I trust) between the two schools: ethnography and fiction. For while he does indeed “write stories,” he has in this volume offered us hope for a resolution of the dilemma posed by the desire to humanize the cultural study of “the other” without betraying the Firthian injunction against simple “assertion.” “Inner structures must be demonstrated, they cannot be invented.” And conclusions must be supported “by some body of evidence” (Firth).

Stewart asks: “If entering the ‘native’ subjective world is desirable, and standard ethnographic texts do not take us there, why not the literary text based on as thorough a knowledge of ‘native’ culture as field-work makes possible?” He answers the question in this volume. And in the process he demonstrates that the “literary text,” written with wit, humor and a special kind of poignancy that comes from immersion *cum* controlled detachment, can be very satisfying indeed. But can one who has the skills do more?²

Because Stewart, like some of the rest of us, is concerned about the trend towards the fictionalization of ethnography, he has, in the present collection, provided us with a work that could prove a model for the mutual enrichment of both: ethnography and fiction

grounded in fieldwork. Thus the volume includes history, biography and other kinds of descriptive and factual data normally presented as part of an ethnographic study. Since much material of this kind may not be appropriate for inclusion in the stories but does provide a context of time and place that increases our understanding, he presents it separately. These data come in the sections he has titled: Who's Speaking Here, In the Field, At the Desk and At the Second Desk.

The combination works. It is a device that reminds one somewhat of the format used so effectively by John Dos Passos some sixty years ago. And it works because neither the stories nor the carefully demarcated sections tries to be the other. The very form of his presentation emphasizes the logic and the necessity of the disjunction. "The individual engaged in solving problems, transcending, understanding, or interpreting them in a personal way," he tells us, "plays a major role in how I think culture happens. One could write about this, but *one could not present it in the formal ethnography*. One could in the literary form which allows exploration of the interior world of thought and feeling" (Emphasis added).

Citing Bradd Shore, Stewart writes: "It is a common mistake to assume that the web of mysteries, minor and major, that constitute an alien culture may be resolved by careful observation alone. Even the most painstaking and perceptive observer eventually discovers that the key to many of the most intriguing and significant aspects of culture lies within the minds of those he observes." How to get there, however, will discourage the more conscientious seekers-after-the-whole-truth, for they must know they cannot achieve that epiphany. But determination seems often to overcome good sense. Consequently, many of the "new anthropologists" are engaged in an endless and inevitably frustrating (if not to them, at least to those of us who read the results) manipulation of signs, symbols, rituals, myths and concrete behavior in their attempt to enter the minds of their subjects/objects, and then, as it were, to smuggle their projections directly into the body of their ethnographies.

What Stewart has managed to do in his juxtaposition of fiction and "ethnography" is to demonstrate that the two should not try to be one. Enclosed within a single volume but dramatically distinguished in tone, typography and substance, each of the genres

embellishes the other and enhances our appreciation and understanding of the whole.

John Stewart writes stories. And he writes interstitial ethnography. There are ethnography and imagination in his stories, but the notes and commentaries stick to what, for want of a better word, we call facts. One need not be an intransigent empiricist or positivist to stress the difficulties of translating field data into individual thought processes. Nor even to raise questions about the reliability of information on thought processes imparted to the ethnographer by the informant. There is only one way to get into “the other’s” head. That is to imagine yourself there. And that, of course, is a lot riskier and should be more intimidating than measuring the dimensions of a yam garden or recording a couple of generations of clan begats.

We don’t need a new genre to get at the exciting world of “the other’s” inner life. Such a genre already exists in the form of fiction. And that is where some of the sharpest insights into the humanity of “the other” may be found — in short stories and novels, creations in which the author need feel no self-consciousness about mind probing nor about his license to explore the interior world of his fictional characters.

While it is possible, as this collection demonstrates, for good fiction to supplement or even in part to supplant ethnography in revealing important aspects of the culture of the “other,” (Good fiction is often acutely ethnographic.), ethnography, because it must submit to reasonable tests of reliability if it is to be useful, must not make knowledge claims it cannot verify.

Because Stewart knows this, and because he writes from his background as a Trinidadian and an anthropologist, without con-fabulation, the stories instruct and inform us subtly about the inner world of his “others” and, in part, about the outer against which the small or large dramas of their lives are being played out. Thus the fictions in this volume are unobtrusive though incomplete ethnographies of a special kind. Many of the residual but more traditional kinds of ethnographic data are skillfully supplied by *Who’s Speaking Here?* and the other notes and commentaries. Stewart does not, of course, maintain that what he does is all of ethnography. But he does, it seems to me, demonstrate conclusively and to our great

pleasure and profit, that there may be a format in which the anthropologist *cum* writer-of-talent can fill in those revealing dimensions of the “other’s” humanity and at the same time give us a cultural document that does not violate suitable limits of ethnographic conjecture.

A few friends tell me that some day the goal of multi-dimensional analysis now being pursued by the new ethnographers will be encompassed within a single work in which creativity and the presentation of “fact” are so cunningly blended and so convincingly demonstrated that even the cautious post-positivists will find the result agreeable. Perhaps. But until that day comes, and unless something like the model demonstrated in this volume gains wide acceptance, we may have to be content with carefully detailed and occasionally soporific ethnographies *and* fully separate but richly informative works of imagination. Meanwhile we are most fortunate to have among us an anthropologist who combines a proper regard for evidentiary norms along with singular talent as a creative writer.

Notes

1. “There is a sloppy notion abroad that since all perception is subjectively organized there are no ‘facts’ to which appeal can be made; any interpretation of social reality is as good as any other”(Raymond Firth, “An Appraisal of Modern Social Anthropology,” in *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 1975. Bernard Siegel, Ed.

2. “[Loren] Eiseley himself clearly understood the different purposes of the scholarly and the literary scientific essays. *He never confused the two*, and there are some cogent and valuable defenses of the literary essay in these pages.” (Review of Eiseley’s *Last Notebooks*, New York Times, 9/14/87. Emphasis added.)

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Introduction

I. Post-Modern Ethnography and the Fictive Mode

(i)

A revisionist impulse in professional anthropology has surfaced from time to time in the past, but not with the sustained intensity of recent years. From Hymes' omnibus critique (1974) to Goldschmidt's warning that fissiparous tendencies among anthropologists are an imminent threat (1986), there has been a steady voicing of concern over the future of institutional anthropology. Without some revision of its methods and objectives, critics say, the discipline is likely to be the agent of its own disappearance. The written ethnography which is the most notable and enduring product in anthropology is at the center of much of the revisionist critique, with direct aim being taken against both form and substance in the standard ethnographic monograph (Marcus & Cushman 1982; Clifford & Marcus 1986).

The formal ethnographic monograph, as it developed, was not assumed to represent the totality of the field research which underpinned it. Anthropology, Levi-Strauss reminded, is an impassioned affair, "the outcome of a historical process which has made the larger part of mankind subservient to the other," and which has seen one part of mankind treat the other "as an object." (1966) The asserted intention of orthodox ethnography is to understand "the other" from an objective, value-free perspective and to document such understanding for a neutral and accurate record. Such an approach was quite in keeping with the strategy of carrying out field research

in the “exotic” societies of the world, which were seen as being at a great remove historically, aesthetically, and structurally from the world of researchers. It helped too, that many of these societies were either dying physically, or facing the circumstance of massive de-culturation: “In the 1850s and after, one could be objective about the Indian as one could not have been ten, twenty, or thirty years before; one could be objective about a creature who had been reduced to the status of a specimen picked up on a field trip. One could move toward scientific analysis and away from pity and censure” (Pearce, quoted in Hymes 1974).

From a superordinate remove, anthropologists could approach their work as tantamount to collecting and analysing the detritus of a passing, or passed, era — fertile ground for the development of a museum-oriented mentality. Along with the artifacts of a given culture, written accounts would serve to fix, objectively, the social and cultural features of given groups. The written ethnography was consciously depersonalized. Any “native” sensibility was thoroughly subordinated to the elucidation of abstract structures which purportedly evidenced evolutionary or other significant patterns. Formal metaphors in language that translated field experience into data were developed. And as anthropology became a firmly institutionalized discipline, the development of scientifically oriented theories, designed to refine our understanding of the abstract formalities that govern peoples’ lives, took precedence over communication of the living experience itself. Ethnographers went after truth of an aggregate and supra-personal order.

On balance, it must be noted that the scientific orientation was adopted in ethnography somewhat in reaction against an earlier approach, which was marked by questionable research procedures, blatantly ethnocentric speculation, and standards of rhetoric and interpretation that were borrowed from the study and practice of literature. Transcending these limitations, which were often of a colonial-imperialist cast, and arriving at value-free interpretations grounded in fact and the discovery of natural laws, was seen as the difference between an anthropology that was overly given to imaginative fantasy, and one that was directly descriptive of the real world. Separation between the workings of the imagination, especially as expressed in literary form, and anthropology as scientifically

grounded truth became a disciplinary priority particularly during the Boasian era.

Boas' students were required, it is said, to hide their literary efforts from the master. Yet, while literary forms of expression were falling into disrepute among anthropologists as a way of presenting their serious work, the literary impulse itself was not altogether neutralised. Some of Boas' most famous students — Margaret Mead, Edward Sapir, Ruth Benedict — struggled against the invalidation of artistic literature as a serious form for anthropologists by cultivating joint identities as both literary artists and anthropologists (Clifford & Marcus 1986). By others it was on occasion found that literary form and technique made up for deficiencies to which the formal monograph was subject. As early as 1890 Adolf Bandelier had published *The Delight Makers*, an ethnography of the Southwest pueblo dwellers, in the orthodox form of a novel. About his choice of form he explained, "I was prompted to perform the work by a conviction that however scientific works may tell the truth about the Indian, they exercise always a limited influence upon the general public, and to that public, in our country as well as abroad, the Indian has remained as good as unknown. By clothing sober facts in the garb of romance I have hoped to make the 'Truth about the Pueblo Indians' more accessible and perhaps more acceptable to the public in general." (1918:v).

Alfred Kroeber later articulated a rationale for anthropological adoption of the fictional form which relates to, but is not identical with, that of Bandelier's. Noting that the stories in *American Indian Life*, (Parsons 1967), sprung from the same intensive studies out of which scientific monographs were issued, Kroeber then marked certain limitations of the monograph:

"The monographs have a way of sticking pretty closely to the objective facts recorded. The mental workings of the people whose customs are described, are subjective, and therefore much more charily put into print. The result is that every American anthropologist with field experience, holds in his memory many interpretations, many convictions as to how his Indians feel, why they act as they do in a given situation, what goes on inside of them. This psychology of the Indian is often expressed by the fron-