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Author(s): Carol B. Stack

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Carol B. Stack

# Writing Ethnography: Feminist Critical Practice

My first anthropological study began in the early 1960s when I chronicled the northbound movement of African-Americans from rural Mississippi, Arkansas, and Louisiana to Chicago — research that eventually led to the writing of *All Our Kin.*[1] Twenty years later, and back in the South, I watched daily the return of first-, second-, and third-generation urban dwellers following their own paths to rural southeastern homeplaces from midwestern and East Coast cities. I am currently completing a book about this dramatic return movement, *Call to Home: African Americans Reclaim the Rural South.*[2] Using both memories and field notes for studies done nearly twenty years apart, I try in this paper to reconstruct the nature of my own comfort and conflict as an ethnographer in these two studies. In the context of the politics and scholarship of the times, I explore the nuances of doing and writing ethnography as a white working-class woman. I do this by reconstructing two ethnographic projects, one from the 1960s and the second from the 1980s, from the perspective of the present and looking backward. Dramatizing both writer and subject in the historical context, I attempt to engage in writing culture as feminist critical practice.

The political energy of the 1960s was churning in "The Flats" (the fictive name of the African-American community that is the site of *All Our Kin*) as well as in nearby neighborhoods and communities. "Black Power" leadership ignited relationships across community boundaries and new alliances emerged out of coalition politics. I was invited to participate in meetings with a group of welfare mothers from "The

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Flats" who had begun a welfare rights organization. Those of us who were community workers and political activists believed that everything was in flux, and anticipated that traditional boundaries could be transformed. Those were the times of Martin Luther King, John Kennedy, civil rights, Black Power, welfare rights, and Vietnam. Personal and political experimentation crisscrossed race, gender, and class divisions. Working within and through a divisive generation gap (especially in white communities), young people under thirty believed that anything was possible. We allowed ourselves to take risks, especially around political action. We were inspired as political activism crossed race/class lines. And we perceived the possibility of social change as a collaboration among people who understood basic social truths about equity and human dignity. This undergirded our belief that acting on such truths would set us free; we produced moral imperatives for our times.

In 1968 I was twenty-eight, a white, working-class, politically active, single mother with a young son who was with me 'round the clock' in "The Flats." The following thoughts are a fragmented compendium of my experiences as a young anthropologist in the field. Looking back at my field notes and interviews, and reflecting on the lessons I learned, especially from my closest ally in the community, Ruby Banks, is a complex task in light of present-day challenges to ethnography. Ruby, who was also a single parent and the oldest daughter in a large extended family network, took on the challenge, and some of the fun, of teaching me to act appropriately as a woman, as a mother, and as a friend in "The Flats." In the manner that friends become "kin" if they seriously take on kin responsibilities, Ruby and her kinfolk included me as a part of their family. This, of course, did not happen immediately, but developed slowly as we came to depend upon one another to carry out the work of kinship, including the assumption of mutual responsibility for one another's children and other children in the kin group. This is more consequential than might be obvious, since many parents in "The Flats" were appalled at the widespread practice in mainstream culture of allowing strangers to "baby sit." Their critique also included a distrust of public and private day care centers run by outsiders. Ruby even carried notions of our "kinship" beyond "The Flats." For example, when she was sick in the hospital she claimed I was her "sister" so the nurses would let me visit. Despite looks of disbelief from nurses and other hospital staff who looked at me and saw a white woman, Ruby's sense of what constituted kin-like exchanges among friends rendered her claim to the hospital bureaucrats honest from her culturally constructed con-



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ception of fictive kinship. In the process, I learned to stretch my previously acquired notions of the boundaries of kinship.

Ruby attempted to teach me how to manage my life as a single woman in "The Flats." She warned me not to be alone with a man in the community. Included in her very careful instructions to me about interviewing men, was her certainty that if I let myself into an uncomfortable situation with a man and said "no," that I would be considered racist. Given my graduate training that included serious advice against developing sexual liaisons in the field (and startling examples of women anthropologists who had been murdered in the field for doing so), my emerging sense of feminist politics in 1968, my strong desire to maintain my primary relationships with women in "The Flats," and my goal of managing a research involvement that was not magnified by sexual/racial politics, I wholeheartedly agreed with Ruby's advice.

Despite an array of instructions on how to act appropriately in the community (which I often thought I would never grasp), and subtle tests of my knowledge and loyalty, there were long periods during my stay in the community when I was allowed to "forget" that I was white. In all seriousness, forgetting may have been a reflection of my own internal sense of comfort that developed over time. Ironically, I felt this transition about midway into the study, when people in the community began calling me "white Caroline." They did this in part so I wouldn't be confused with Ruby's niece, whom they began to call "black Caroline." My new nickname offered a wry twist on my identity: my "naming" was both a sign of acceptance and an unfeigned marker. People teased and commended me for acting right, observing that I must forget my own whiteness myself from time to time. But my lapses were quickly roused when I heard my nickname, which was used more in public than in the privacy of family life. My presence was public; my presence was named. I was "white Caroline."

As I look back there is no doubt that the meaning of my life was tied up with being in "The Flats." Within a small group of associates we created a situation of trust — a safety zone in which we pushed boundaries and experimented, nourishing one another's curiosities, not just the anthropologists'. From time to time a group of us would venture outside "The Flats" into the nearby white hangouts where people in "The Flats" felt they would not be safe without me. For example, we went to a couple of country and western bars a few miles from "The Flats." These adventures and inventions, however, were mere tokens compared to the world Ruby and her close friends opened up to me.



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From Ruby and countless other single parents in "The Flats," I learned how rights and responsibilities for children were distributed within and across kin groups. Their lives as single parents were far less isolated from kin and informal supports than the few white single parents I knew before I began my research in the late 1960s. During that time period I found myself alone as a single parent in the middle-class world of academics. During my stay in "The Flats," I was learning what I later came to realize were feminist strategies for surviving as a single parent within networks of friends and extended kin. My young child was with me, and we took turns with the children. I learned about child-keeping by practicing, which, of course, was a blessing to a single parent in the field. Over many months I learned women's strategies for negotiating kin, single motherhood, men, and the welfare system.

Near the completion of my fieldwork I reread *Tally's Corner*,[3] written by Elliot Liebow in 1967. Although I had read it earlier, I was startled by the fact that this now classic ethnography was almost entirely about individual men — men at the donut shop, on the corner, on the streets. In my own work I learned about women's connections to one another and their social/familial networks and through their eyes, about their connections to men. I asked different questions than Liebow and became fascinated with the role of women's networks in family survival. Liebow left unexamined where the women, children, and grandparents were. Where were the fathers, aunts, uncles, and cousins? I knew, and I wanted to write about the strength and resilience of women's ways of keeping families together.

When I stepped out of the field to write *All Our Kin*, in Langston Hughes' words in his short story, "Home," my "skin burned, I felt my color." I confronted my whiteness more utterly as a writer than as a researcher. I felt very alone and color-conscious as I began writing. I also felt, what looking back I might call a "white woman's burden." Inside "The Flats," folks devised ways to blunt yet clarify color differences in our everyday experiences. When I began writing the ethnography I became color/politically conscious. I felt a strong sense of social responsibility to those I had studied, and I held a conviction that I could get the story right. I tried out every word I wrote on people I knew in "The Flats." I listened to their responses, argued, and tried again. I wanted the story to ring true to their experiences. When I finally wrote the book, I wrote in deep seriousness on the very first page of the Introduction:



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> This introduction anticipates curiosity about how a young white woman could . . . conduct a study of black family life, and provides a basis for evaluating the reliability and quality of the data obtained.[4]

This sample (and the tenor of the Introduction to *All Our Kin*) mirrors the rationalist assumptions of the times, implying a method for evaluating the reliability of the qualitative methods and the data presented in the book. The feminist critique of fieldwork and the writing of ethnography in the 1990s is far less sanguine with respect to what constitutes "good social science." The flat accent on reliability and objectivity of data has been transformed through the filter of critical and feminist theory. Moreover, we are unconvinced that any attempt at clarifying our positionality does more than situate the perspective from which we believe we are "writing culture." The goal is to explore and experiment — to learn and write as much about our own understanding of how we locate our voice in our writing as possible. We acknowledge that how we position ourselves in our research and writing must be finely tuned with respect to the times, the region, the setting, and race/gender politics of the historical moment. From the vantage point of radical post-modern discourses "writing ethnography" is still on hold.[5] With a sharp turn toward the fragmentation of voices and stories, the process of writing ethnography has turned inward toward subjectivity. We could argue that ethnography itself has been taken as illusion, the fiction of the writer herself. Indeed, the more extravagant post-modern theorists undertake a pulverization of the modern subject itself.

The 1980s were fragmented by a backlash against the legacy of legal and moral commitments that stirred the 1960s and 1970s. Some of the legal and institutional mandates that took root have already been uprooted. Dialectic within and across political agendas had dominated an epoch of contradictions. We have witnessed a fragile and ephemeral attempt at the institutionalization of liberation values (affirmative action, for example), alongside the emergence of a "new right" morality. Nowhere in the country was this power struggle between, for example, forces such as Jessie Jackson and The New Right, fundamentalism and feminism, more graphic than in the South — or "New South."

What emerged in the 1980s was a "politics of rebuttal": new racisms and ethnic antagonisms co-existing with dramatic shifts in power, both individual and global, and connecting the two. Individuals and political groups fashioned new identities, new roles, and mul-



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tiple identities. Pro-choice new right feminists emerged, for example. Traditional coalitions were revisioned, and sometimes betrayed.

American dreams — downward mobility, joblessness, estranged Vietnam veterans, homelessness, loss of hope, new racisms, distrust, and a fear of new ideas — produced new sets of contradictions. These challenges took place in the context of deindustrialization in the North and South. At the same time institutions were hammering out some progressive agendas that were indeed legacies of the 1960s and 1970s. Nostalgia for the past was exposed by disillusioned youth dressing in 1960s garb, and population movements emerged among adults. For example, the "small town boom" of middle-aged migrants reinforced a longing for communities of memory.

In the 1980s I was a nearly middle-age professor, and my son was finishing high school. I was involved in ethnographic fieldwork among African Americans once again. This time I was studying people who were returning to rural southern homeplace communities. My research site had moved from the Deep South migration of African-Americans to midwestern cities, to the return migration of people moving from the Northeast to the Southeast.

More often than not, my 80-year-old mother rather than my teen-age son accompanied me as I probed the meaning of home to those returning to the rigid race/caste system of the rural South. We learned how effective women community workers were in achieving their dreams to improve the lot of rural women. They succeeded in creating day care for working women, bringing Title XX funds to rural communities, and creating coalitions across counties working toward rural economic development. In part because my mother was alone, and because she was genuinely welcomed by families in these rural communities, she often joined me in my study of families returning South. Together we also observed divisions between returnees and the old-timers and their struggle over an appropriate political pace and plan for social change. We observed together how identity politics shaped tensions between generations. But even more unmistakable on the political horizon were differences across gender lines.

*Call to Home* focuses on the return South of African-American women and men bringing home "urban" knowledge, and on identity politics — how gender and ideology shape the commitments and political actions of women and men who return to rural southern homeplaces. The book is about the collision between the multiple notions and aspirations people bring home and the tight rope they walk in constructing workable identities in the South. Those who have returned have become artful in assuming personal and political iden-



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tities appropriate to the situation at hand. I learned that on one level it was important for those who returned to be accepted back into the community as "homegirls" or "homeboys." However, many of the people who returned carry with them a political mission. They want to transform their homeplaces, and no matter how hard they try to be accepted within their communities, their more aggressive approach to social change labels them as "outsiders." In church, at local political meetings, or in the creation of coalitions across race lines, people enact multiple roles assuming the posture of "homegirl," "outsider," or "New Yorker" when appropriate. They also pay their respects to the rural elderly, and wrangle with differing identities depending on the situation, the moment, the nature of the coalition, the day, the audience, and their mood. Women and men talked about belonging and identity, about being and origins, about home, about place, about homeplace, and about locating their place and my place in the research setting.

Most of the people returning were in their forties, near my own age at that time, joining their grandparents and school-age children who had moved back home ahead of them. The parents of these return migrants were planning to return when they reached age sixty-five or had put in the necessary years working in the North so that they could bring retirement benefits home.

Recollecting my sensibilities from my fieldwork in the 1980s, I relive, as I now write, the complicated and painful deliberations of people attempting to explain how they negotiated their identities — who they were, and who they came to be back home. After three years of intense political work attempting to bring day care to eight rural counties in the Carolinas, one politically active young grandmother, Doris Moody, talked to me about how she labored to negotiate her place back home. "We belong and we don't," she told me. I learned how Doris tempered her political stance to meet the political situation. She was careful to avoid moving too fast, acting the part of "homegirl" when necessary. But she also shared her anxiety that if she and others accommodated to tradition too often they would give in sooner or later to the ways things had always been done.

In informal settings, in homes, and as we traveled long distances across rural counties to meetings and workshops, I listened and participated in discussions about rural day care, public funds, political elections, the Farmer's Home Administration, school systems, and farm loss. In contrast to my research in "The Flats," where I was intimately drawn into women's kin networks, I felt more like a colleague or long-term visitor than an adopted family member. The for-



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malities and civility of southern tradition created a place, but not a "fictive" home for me. On the other hand, I was deeply connected to women-centered political organizations in rural counties attempting to write a feminist agenda around the needs of rural women. In contrast to the male-dominated black nationalist politics of the 1960s, the leadership and organizing efforts of women was critical in these rural southern communities.

The women and men who returned home cross-cut many walks of life and economic circumstances. Some were college-educated, experienced professionals, others had acquired organizing skills and knowledge of public sector programs and funding. Yet others returned disheartened, houseless in the North, if not homeless. People often said that they returned changed — a different person from the person who left the South. Likewise my status and sensibilities had changed from my early research in "The Flats." Between 1975 and 1987 I was professor at Duke University, a director of a family policy center, and actively engaged in advocating reforms in state policy regarding families and children. I was nearly middle-aged and moderately middle-class. My son was in high school, my father had passed away, and my mother was elderly. Fortuitously, I returned to the field with a change in status somewhat similar to middle-class people who returned South. I was close to their age, and at the same life stage. As an outsider, I too was suspect, observed, and subject to unwritten rules, prescriptions, and restrictions.

In contrast to my fieldwork in the 1960s, this time I felt my color. The "insiders/outsiders" who returned were themselves working out their own places in rural home communities. I, too, was negotiating a space and became increasingly absorbed in how my own history affects the way I do ethnography. I was displaced far from home. How could I locate myself in the space/geography, and what would people ask of me? Had I experienced anything similar to their managing lives as both outsider and insider? My memories brought to mind my experience as the only working-class Jewish person in the community in which I grew up, and in all of the schools I attended from kindergarten through high school.

Sometimes working with women's political networks organizing around the needs of rural women, I was associated with the few white radicals who had moved into these rural communities in the 1970s and managed to maintain a power base as leaders in these alternative organizations. However, because people perceived that I was not seeking a power base, I was invited to meetings near the hub of coalition building and decision making. But this led to a difficult research



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dilemma. Often I was pulled by contending factions who wanted me to understand/take their side in difficult, ongoing debates. My best teachers in negotiating this tension were women community workers who skillfully moved back and forth between offense and conciliation.

The battle ground over the construction of homeplace "identities" was located not only with respect to the white community, but all too painful, among and across generations of African Americans in rural homeplaces as well. Among the many examples from my fieldwork, the following event illustrates multiple oscillations in the management of identities among politically active women within the course of a single evening.

Elders in these rural communities are treated with respect. A banquet arranged by local community organizers in honor of Miss Hammer, an elderly community leader, was held at a local hotel on a summer evening when my mother was visiting me in the field. At this event the tension between deference and respect for elders, some of whom risked their lives in early civil rights protests, and the politics of new leaders was brought into tension. The new leadership refused to perpetuate traditional brokerage systems between the local white and black power structures. They brought professionalized approaches and accountability to the management of local political organizations. They refused to immortalize the cachet of white pacemakers, those outsiders who retained power within local communities as organizers/leaders long after the civil rights movement.

At the banquet that evening, there was also a movement within the sponsoring organization to oust Mr. Jones, the remaining white "chair" of the organization. Mr. Jones was a long-term political associate of Miss Hammer's. They had started civil rights groups together. Although most of the anguish and debate took place in tense gatherings behind closed doors and in hotel rooms, the lines of argument and political coalitions divided across generations, and between newcomers and old-timers. My mother and I, guests of newcomers who initiated the debate, witnessed hurt feelings and deep emotions flowing over new leadership in the local organization.

Following the banquet my mother and Miss Hammer, age-mates and old acquaintances by that stage of my fieldwork (and the two oldest people present at the event), sat together to talk. People gathered around their memories. Everyone talked until all the dishes and favors and flowers were gone. My mother and Miss Hammer talked until the banquet room was turned into an empty hall with the exception of the chairs gathered around them in a circle. The many voices of resistance heard that evening in private spaces merged, for the mo-



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ment, into respectful "homegirl" voices in Miss Hammer's presence. No final resolution that evening. A respect for the elderly.

Willingness to engage in discussion with an anthropologist is an indication of fortitude as well as state of mind. Dolores Dodson, for example, checked me out ahead of time. She learned from a friend that I had written a book and borrowed a tattered copy, which she read before agreeing to meet me. Late one afternoon I mastered her hand-drawn map, which I followed past several farms and two churches down endless dirt roads that led to her house. By the time I arrived, she had developed a critique of my work. We spent a couple of days comparing her experiences as a New Jersey social worker with my description of urban black families in midwestern cities. Amenable to building our relationship, Dolores was clear that she had something to teach me. One afternoon our conversation blossomed into a lively, overcrowded group discussion as friends and neighbors dropped in to visit. With everyone giving me personal notions of how I should go about this study, Dolores, lending support to my project, professed, "You see here a white woman capable of learning."

During our conversation she gave the go ahead to the women in the room, telling them about my current study and suggesting that they give me their notions of how I should go about it. Lending support to my project, my sponsor confessed to others that "It would be best, for the time being, if the white community was not aware of Carol's presence." In contrast to my experiences in "The Flats," Dolores and her neighbors asked me early on to be inconspicuous. The politics of race and power informed Dolores' belief that local whites viewed white outsiders who entered the black community as organizers stirring up trouble. However, these same women engaged the public sector at all levels — local, regional, and state — in their efforts to bring public funds to rural day care. As they got to know me they invited me to accompany them to public meetings and dropped their early misgivings about whether my presence could be known to the local white community.

A couple of months after I had arrived in New Jericho, one of the local communities in my study, Howard, a county attorney, arranged to meet with me over dinner for our second conversation. I waited until the last person left his office on Main Street. After a moment's pause he made clear that there was no public place where a white woman and a black man could eat together. "The word," he said, "would be all over town." It could destroy his reputation and his law practice. Hesitating, he suggested a take-out meal, which he volunteered to get, and sputtered softly, then out loud, that we weren't in



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New York City. "Can't even have a business meal together here." Home and the disposition of what constitutes "public spaces" deeply affected my research relationships with men in this study. In "The Flats" I was public, and could be seen in public with men (but not in private). In these rural southern townships in the 1980s, long after local whites were aware of my presence, men could/would not be in the public spaces of whites with me. My conversations with men, for the most part, took place in the privacy of homes sequestered several miles away from the town squares.

Doing fieldwork in the 1980s there was rarely a moment when the delicate balance of identity politics loosened its hold. However, when I returned to my post at the university and slowly began the process of writing ethnography, it was the height of the post-modern moment. For all theoretical purposes I suddenly felt ironically freed of my whiteness. I was subject as well as author, and as such won license to write about my own subjective, authentic experience. I could/should/would write a fragmented story of return migration in multiple voices, and reflect on the meaning of home through my own eyes. Mine was another voice. As a writer I could pay close attention to difference, ambiguity, shifting voices and roles. I too was seeing and being observed. Writing ethnography in these new times, I could shed the singularity of truth and improvise among shifting voices. I did this for a year or two while writing a draft of the book on return migration.

Reflecting back to the late 1960s and early 1970s, my sense of social responsibility as an ethnographer was enveloped in a search for truth. A discourse of moralism and power linked in part to the civil rights movement, to feminism, and to the anti-Vietnam movement, informed a generation of activist anthropologists. As feminists we made claims and created alliances as our sisters' keeper. We created a discourse that focused on the unity of women's lives; this unity became a struggle for agency that whitewashed women's lives. Given my own background growing up in a working-class family that struggled against poverty, I was personally alienated by race/class blinders in feminist theory and politics. However, interspersed among these prejudices, there were efforts among coalitions of women to counteract race/class bias in both theory and social policy. For example, working together with the local Welfare Rights Organization in "The Flats," we produced testimony against child support legislation (IV-D) that pitted low-income welfare mothers against divorced lower- and middle-income mothers. The National Organization of Women, on the other hand, testified in favor of this bill, ignoring the best interests of very poor women. My political commitments have been toward the



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construction of feminist research and policy agendas that take seriously relationships of race, class, and gender.

Agendas that tie research to social change can be at odds with current post-modern trends in the academy. In the latter part of the 1980s, the way was paved for ethnographers to go full circle, to shed ourselves of many notions, in particular, that we could tell another's truth. Gender itself became problematized, identities multiplied, class and race became complicated and fluid constructions. We were engaged in a discourse of relativism and intersubjectivities in which we tried to deconstruct our own experiences and locate ourselves in our tale. In good spirit we tangled with multiple voices, and disentangled our own.

Critical theory and radical post-modern discourse have transformed ethnographic writing. Those of us still writing feminist ethnography face several dilemmas whose reconciliation is beyond the scope of this paper. We are still in dialogue over the departure from grand theory, the crisis of legitimation, claims of representation, and the predicament of voice and story for the writing of ethnography.

Whereas I was very careful to avoid claims that "The Flats" represented African-American culture in *All Our Kin*, I reluctantly look back on the functionalist mosaic of that early writing. I had been trained early on as an anthropologist to weave a coherent story, one in which the parts fit together and buttress the whole. I searched through my field notes for stories that fit together, to explain rights and responsibilities with respect to children. In those days, I am aware now, I paid less attention to the tensions and contradictions in people's experiences, and looked less for the disjunctures and contradictions in the stories. I painstakingly transcribed and presented their narratives word for word in a search for accuracy, with little puzzlement over the discontinuities or over the construction of the narrative itself.[6]

Critical theory and what we might call the humanity of understanding have taken us down a fascinating and important path away from a home-base, and we will never return. As anthropologists we are inside and outside the text, writing it and reading it, questioning its very construction, and searching for discontinuities and ambiguities with the narratives and the larger cultural texts. But in the end it is the ethnographer who lays her fingers on the keyboard to play the final note on the chorus of voices. Purged of an awesome and impossible claim that I write the "subject's" truth, I still believe it possible that the ethnographies I write reflect a progressive and feminist social agenda. As feminist ethnographers we take on a knotty paradox of



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social responsibility: we are accountable for the consequences of our writing, fully cognizant that the story we construct is our own.

## Notes

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1. Carol B. Stack, *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972). "The Kindred of Viola Jackson" describes the migration north of 98 relatives moving from the rural South to midwestern cities.
2. Carol B. Stack, *Call to Home: African Americans Reclaim the Rural South* (New York: Basic Books, forthcoming).
3. Elliot Liebow, *Tally's Corner* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967).
4. *All Our Kin*, xv.
5. For an important discussion of the construction of narrative, see Edward Bruner, "Ethnography as Narrative," in *The Anthropology of Experience*, ed. V. Turner and E. Bruner (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1986) 149–150.
6. Gillis Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), and *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).



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