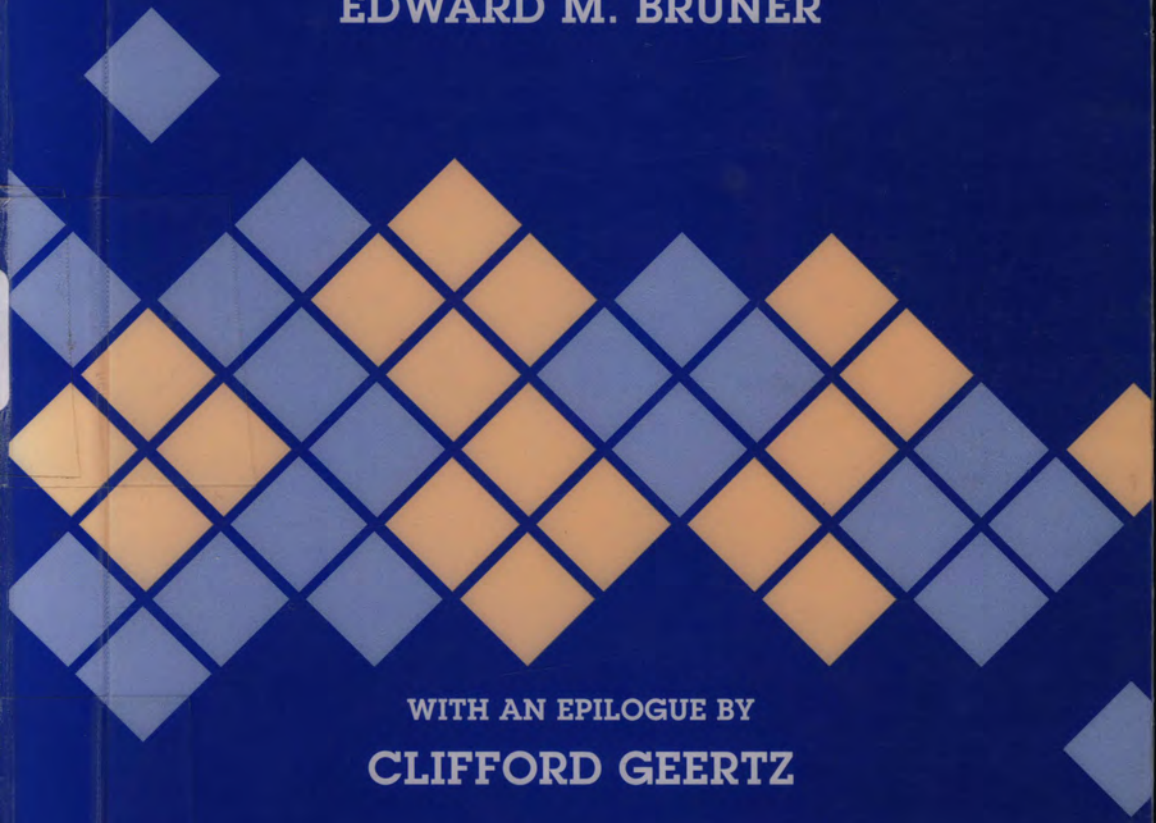
THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF EXPERIENCE

EDITED BY

VICTOR W. TURNER

AND

EDWARD M. BRUNER



WITH AN EPILOGUE BY

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To Vic and Barbara

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Making Experiences, Authoring Selves

CLIFFORD GEERTZ

R. P. Blackmur, writing, I think, about Henry James and the charge that James's work was so rarefied because he had not lived enough, remarked that no one, artist or otherwise, is ever really short of experience. We all have very much more of the stuff than we know what to do with, and if we fail to put it into some graspable form (not, of course, the case with James in any event) the fault must lie in a lack of means, not of substance. The essays collected in this volume are mainly about people or peoples who quite clearly have such means, or have devised them. It is not that they have had more experience, whatever that could mean, or better. Instead, they have, in Barbara Myerhoff's fine phrase, authored themselves, made themselves someone to whom, in the famous cry of Willy Loman's wife, attention must be paid.

It is at least one of the jobs of the ethnographer (to my mind, the most important) to pay such attention, particularly to the means. We cannot live other people's lives, and it is a piece of bad faith to try. We can but listen to what, in words, in images, in actions, they say about their lives. As Victor Turner, the moving force in all these studies and in so much more in recent anthropology, argued, it is with expressions—representations, objectifications, discourses, performances, whatever—that we traffic: a carnival, a mural, a curing rite, a revitalization movement, a clay figurine, an account of a stay in the woods. Whatever sense we have of how things stand with someone else's inner life, we gain it through their expressions, not through some magical intrusion into their consciousness. It's all a matter of scratching surfaces.

Even this, however, is trickier than it seems. It is not enough,

as has recently been more and more suggested, to record streams of directly given cultural materials (chants, myths, dialogues, rites, life histories, designs, terminologies) and then, translating strictly, simply get out of the way so as to let them shine in their own light—an updated version of that most persistent ethnographic will-'o-the-wisp, brute fact. As Renato Rosaldo demonstrates with his maddening (to us) hunting tales which consist of strings of place-names, lists of animals, and vague references to moving about, this sort of text-positivism simply won't do. If we want a story out of this we need to know how, for an Ilongot, a story can be got out of it, or seen to be in it. And so on for what Barbara Babcock calls the "modeled selves" of Puebloan pottery ("we are all in there, in the clay"); for James Fernandez, the "argument of images" (parrot's egg, kralled bull) of African ceremonies; and for Bruce Kapferer, the "continuous present" of Sinhalese curing ritual ("deities and demons . . . coexistent in the . . . flowing motion of music and dance"). The burden of description, saying what it is others are saying, is not so easily shed.

It is here that "experience," the elusive master concept of this collection, one that none of the authors seems altogether happy with and none feels able really to do without, becomes the asses' bridge all must cross. The recent vicissitudes of "experience" in English discourse (or perhaps it is only American)—where individuals no longer learn something or succeed at something but have a learning experience or a success experience, where (as Frederick Turner remarks) "My upbringing tells me one thing but all my experience tells me another" and "Did you read that in a book or was it a real experience?" are taken to be coherent sentences, and where the announcement of some Smiling Jack that he is about to share an experience with you is enough to make you reach for your wallet—make the prospects for honest use of the word seem remote. But it is equally true that without it, or something like it, cultural analyses seem to float several feet above their human ground. If what James Boon, following Alexander Pope at the appropriate distance, calls the Machinery of culture is not to spin on in some frictionless paradise where no one fears or remembers or hopes or imagines, nobody murders or rescues or revolts or consoles, it must engage some sort of felt life, which might as well be called experience. Perpetual signification machines can do no more work than perpetual motion ones; occurrence must break in somewhere.

This perplexity, getting from cultural forms to lived life and back again in such a fashion that neither disappears and both are explicated, at least somewhat, animates all the essays in this volume. Some (Victor Turner, Roger Abrahams, Richard Schechner) approach the issue generally, the majority through one or another special case. Some (Frederick Turner, Phyllis Gorfain) address literary texts; some (Barbara Myerhoff, John Stewart), historical events; some (James Fernandez, Bruce Kapferer), formular dramas. Edward Bruner is worried about ethnographical stories; Renato Rosaldo, indigenous ones. Barbara Babcock ponders a single sort of object crafted by a particular artist; James Boon, the overall structure of a vast and various cultural order. Dewey and Dilthey, Goffman and Schutz, Lévy-Bruhl and Lévi-Strauss, all are invoked; and so is the reptilian brain. But the aim is the same throughout: to discover something about how, to use Victor Turner's capacious phrasing, "the hard-won meanings" that inform "the whole human vital repertoire of thinking, willing, desiring, and feeling" are "said, painted, danced, dramatized, put into circulation."

All these ways of putting experience into circulation (and, for that matter—consider Stewart's tracing of the fluctuating presence of Trinidad's dangerous classes in the carnival and Bruner's of the disappearance of the disappearing Indian in ethnography—taking it out) are well represented by the essays in this volume, which seem almost as though they were constructed in counterpoint to one another. Parades of invisibles in California set off processions of sectarians in Africa. "This is play" theatrical paradoxes in *Hamlet* (acting "mad" and "acting" mad) set off "this is text" sociological ones in Bali ("exceptionally everything can mesh . . . inherently everything does not"). Autobiographical potteries in Puebloan ceramics set off mechanical gestures in Hindu drama. Murals, campfire tales, steel bands, midnight trances, and Thoreau's hypnotic sand bank: whatever else an anthropology of experience might be, it is clear that it is, like experience as such, abundant, multiform, and a bit out-of-hand. Wherever we are, it is not at the gates of paradigm-land.

The anthropologist's way of putting at least some order into these collections of . . . shall we call them expresssions? representations? *Darstellungen? signe?* symbols? . . . has been, of course, to connect them to the life around them—and there are a number of ways of doing that, as illustrated in these pieces, from Boon's

or Rosaldo's social poetics to Kapferer's or V. Turner's social phenomenology. But what joins the pieces together is more the one way they do *not* do it; they do *not* match cultural forms, conceived as self-contained systems of beliefs and values, as "conceptual schemes," to social structures, conceived as separately organized patterns of collective behavior, as "institutions." The Durkheimian manner that has been for so long the favored mode of dealing with symbolic materials in anthropology—the "see, it fits!" clanish-thoughts-for-clanish-societies approach to things—is silently but firmly discarded.

In Myerhoff's analysis, for example, those peculiar, intractable, and not unpainful realities—aging, Jewish history, and Southern California—are not set forth as plain texts to which her particular objects of interest, the protest march against "death by invisibility" and the frieze depiction of the passage from home, refer in some isomorphic way, as encoded statements of social facts. Rather, these broader background matters are set forth as part of a somewhat overflowing and not altogether manageable stream of experience stretching back to New York and Poland, of which the narrower, more immediate matters of the march and the frieze are also a part. The "symbolic acts" (are there any other kind?) articulate the "hard-won meanings" of these realities; they make clear to those who enact them, those who witness them, and those who "study" them just what it is to be old and Jewish in a Venice where the canals are boardwalks and the gondolas, bicycles. Myerhoff is concerned with examining those meanings, with tracing out the mutual implications, some of them barely susceptible of discursive statement, between the large and the little, the persisting and the passing, the existent and the felt, that they project. Nothing here of that tired cryptography in which everything stands for something else and always says the same thing: society gets what society needs.

Similarly, Stewart traces the vicissitudes of carnival across time, class, and race in Trinidad, not to show that social conflict is "reflected" in the changes in the symbolic expressions central to the festival, but to show that those changes in symbolism are part of that conflict—and not the least important part at that. Fantasy is not a simple turning of one's back on "reality" but a way, however devious, strange, and explosive, of coming into contact with it; indeed, in part constructing it. The effort of the Trinidadian postcolonial elite to take control of this particular bit of collective fantasy, nearly to the point of managing it into a Ministry of Culture limbo, and more recent moves by the imaginatively dispossessed to resist that effort ("The time has come to return carnival to the streets") are directly and literally political, not obliquely and metaphorically so. These clashes of beauty contests and *danse macabres* don't mirror another struggle in another place about something else: they are the thing itself. As Stewart indicates, this is not unfrightening; but then conflicts in the realm of fancy rarely are.

In Bruner's confrontation of the stories ethnologists used to tell about native American culture change in the 1930s and 1940s with the ones they tell now, it is not some Zeitgeist match between symbolic and sociological matters that is being set up: vanishing Indians in depression, resurgent ones in inflation. It is a contrast between schemes of discourse, schemes by means of which anthropologists, drawing on the more general narrative resources around them, have formulated what little experience of Indian life they manage to have obtained. The feathered Indian as exotic Other, all noble and doomed, fading into an MGM sunset, or the T-shirted Indian as political victim standing out, angry and indomitable, against the hegemony of white society, are, as Bruner indicates, not mere tropes floating above what is really going on; they are what is going on at every level from Bureau of Indian Affairs' policy to the summoning to current use of the Pueblo Revolt. Like murals and carnivals, stories matter. So—and this is the thing for anthropologists to remember, as well as their readers—do stories about stories.

If, however, the dualism of "culture pattern" and "social structure" is avoided in these essays as reductive or blinding, two other resonant terms, "text" and "performance," come into the center of attention. They are perceived not as independent realities to be fitted together in the name of mechanical or quasi-mechanical, "such-are-the-facts" explanation; rather, they come as "seeing-as" elucidations of one another, inseparable moments of an interpretive dialectic, in principle endless. Whether seeing text as performance, as F. Turner, Gorfain, Boon, and Babcock largely do, or performance as text, as Fernandez, Kapferer, Rosaldo, and Schechner largely do, the empirical passage back and forth between cultural productions—figurines or exorcisms—and personal

experiences—remembrance or solitude—is mainly negotiated in terms of a conceptual passage, no less treacherous, between symbol as action and action as symbol.

The text-as-performance approach is, of course, most clearly seen in the essays by F. Turner on *Walden* and Gorfain on *Hamlet*, for they deal with texts in the most literal sense of the term—elite, canonical, auctorial documents, definitively edited and widely published. Yet neither views their subject as a verbal artifact locked away in a language world. Thoreau, setting out to "carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look," produced, in Turner's words, "simultaneously a work of self-description and of self-construction." Shakespeare, setting shows within shows to show "that within which passes show," produced, according to Gorfain, "a jest, a gesture, incomplete, a sign about signs." Factive or fictive, a weather report from the Concord woods or an imaginary tragedy with a real melodrama in it, texts are acts; "strategies," in Kenneth Burke's famous slogan, "for encompassing situations."

With Boon and Babcock it is no longer literary productions but materialized images of one sort or another that are the "texts." But the way in which experience is thrust onto the social stage—by the operations of Balinese "semantic Machineries" or the affirmations of Cochiti "speaking objects"—remains the focus of analysis. Boon's Machineries, a cascade of titles, gods, and allegorical geometries, are diverse and abundant; inherently paradoxical, irreducibly plural; ungoverned by any single principle of organization either internal to themselves or brought in, deus ex natura, from outside. Yet "the institutions and performances of Balinese culture"—they give to collective life a collective form. Babcock's (or rather, Helen Cordero's) objects are, in the literal sense anyway, individual creations, but they, too, bring a common sense of life—corn and clay and bread—into the common light of day. An intensely personal text ("It's my grandfather. . . . His mouth is open because he's singing") is a consummately public performance ("[giving] life to the people"); and the one implies the other: "nobody should sing alone."

The reverse movement of the dialectic, from performance toward text (and because it *is* a "seeing-as" dialectic, not a "seeing-through" reduction, that is involved, none of these essays proceeds wholly in one direction or the other), engages the anthropologist in the glossing of acts and the reading of actions. For Fernandez, the doings to be construed are revitalistic rituals; for Kapferer, curing ceremonies; for Schechner, dramaturgical gestures; for Rosaldo, as-I-was-a-huntin' storytellings. Behavioral hermeneutics.

In Fernandez, this movement is perhaps the most explicit: the analysis of African attempts, now extremely widespread, to reinvigorate cultures grown somehow "unsatisfactory"—disjoint, spiritless, obsolete—is conceived to rest on what can only be called a tropology of action. Understanding what "revitalization movements" mean to those who participate in them depends, he argues, on seeing how metaphorical images repetitively enacted in new-made rituals set up chains of "continuous and discontinuous analogies" (man : tree : forest : society) and create unlabeled "superordinate semantic categories" (dweller-talker-parrot-prophet) so as to reconnect the disconnected and restore the faded. "The performance of a sequence of images ["marching to and fro . . . to drumbeats and bugle call"; or "kneeling around a deep hole dug into the sand, at the bottom of which a small trace of ocean water has seeped up"; or "(running) faster and faster in tighter and tighter circles"] revitalizes, in effect and by simple iteration, a universe of [cultural] domains, an acceptable cosmology of participation, a compelling whole." When texts lose their meaning, performances rewrite them; anyway, they try to.

In Kapferer's Sri Lanka the texts have not, so it seems, lost their meaning, at least for the healthy and unpossessed; but it is still performance—"a unity of text and enactment"—that gives them their practical force. In exorcism rituals the reexperiencing of a vital connection to the surrounding society, a connection that the patient, sunk into a solipsistical solitude, has at least temporarily been deprived of, is restored by machinery of Boon-like complexity operating with a Fernandez-like immediacy. It is the movement of such rituals from the "vivid present" subjectivity externalized in music, song and dance, and in an odd way trance, to the "dialogic" intersubjectivity represented in comic drama that cures: patients are rejoined to the common imagination by measured doses of applied art. Schechner's piece, the most speculative in the volume as well as the most free-ranging—a sort of anthropological "My Dinner with André"—seeks a neuro-psychological foundation for the effectiveness of such art and provides an experi-

mental setting, drums and accordions, chanting and deep breathing, in which to examine it. Rosaldo's essay, the most detailed and systematic, seeks to demonstrate how one kind of it—personal narrative—works out in fact, how Philippine hunting stories are made compelling in the recounting of them, how they become "historiable," *lisible*, form into texts. The passage from what is done toward what is meant, like that from what is meant toward what is done, involves above all a capacity to transcend our deep-grained assumption that signs are one thing and experiences another.

It is, after all, the life of signs in society—text-as-performance, performance-as-text—that brings about the contrast both V. Turner and Abrahams, the theorists here (so far as the thing admits of theory), see as critical to "the anthropology of experience": "*mere* experience" as against "*an* experience." "Mere experience," according to Turner, "is simply the passive endurance and acceptance of events. *An* experience, like a rock in a Zen sand garden, stands out from the evenness of passing hours and years and forms what Dilthey called a 'structure of experience.'" Abrahams, invoking John Dewey to the same purpose ("Life is no uniform uninterrupted march or flow. It is a thing of histories, each with its own plots, its own inceptions and movement toward its close . . ."), develops the contrast even further into one between "mere experience," "an experience," and "a typical experience"; between an event, its interpretive replay as we recollect it to ourselves or recount it to others, and its assimilation into the standardized categories that, however we struggle, outline our lives: "the American Experience, the Jewish Experience, the Sixties Experience, even the Growing-Up or Growing-Old Experience."

Experiences, like tales, fetes, potteries, rites, dramas, images, memoirs, ethnographies, and allegorical machineries, are made; and it is such made things that make them. The "anthropology of experience," like the anthropology of anything else, is a study of the uses of artifice and the endlessness of it. The wrenching question, sour and disabused, that Lionel Trilling somewhere quotes an eighteenth-century aesthetician as asking—"How Comes It that we all start out Originals and end up Copies?"—finds in these essays some beginnings of an answer that is surprisingly reassuring: it is the copying that originates.

Notes on Contributors

ROGER D. ABRAHAMS is a folklorist who has written extensively in the areas of Afro-American and Anglo-American traditions and the theory of expressive acts and events. Presently on the faculty of the folklore department at the University of Pennsylvania, he has also taught at Scripps and Pitzer colleges, in California, and at the University of Texas at Austin. Recent books include *Positively Black* and (co-author with John Szwed) *After Africa: Extracts from British Travel Accounts and Journals.*

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