

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Clifford Geertz. *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1988. 157 pp. \$19.95 (cloth) (Reviewed by Richard Handler)**

The agenda for much of recent anthropology was set by the publication, in 1973, of Clifford Geertz's "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture."<sup>1</sup> There, Geertz established the saliency of the culture-as-text metaphor, a metaphor that grounded his theoretical emphasis on anthropology as an interpretive or hermeneutic science. Among other things, the essay claimed that anthropological interpretations are fictional—"in the sense that they are 'something made,' 'something fashioned' . . . not that they are false"—and that writing, or "inscription," is at the heart of the anthropological endeavor.<sup>2</sup> Since that seminal essay, some of the most intriguing work in, and about, anthropology has concerned the rhetorical and literary qualities of anthropological writing. Particularly important has been an essay "On Ethnographic Authority," by James Clifford.<sup>3</sup> Clifford argued that anthropologists establish the authoritative voice necessary for their professional writing by recounting enough fieldwork incidents to prove that "they were there." Having established ethnographic authority, the fieldworker's persona disappears from the text, which is now narrated by an omniscient, objective reporter. For Clifford, this rhetorical strategy reflects the colonial situation in which Westerners dominated others by transforming them into voiceless objects of analysis.

In *Works and Lives*, a book based on lectures delivered at Stanford University in 1983, Geertz presents his own analysis of ethnographic authority. In his preface, Geertz announces that *Works and Lives* is concerned only secondarily with biographical and historical matters; its primary focus is on "how anthropologists write" (p. vi). Such an emphasis is worthwhile, his first chapter explains, because the persuasiveness of anthropological writings derives neither from the amassing of facts, nor from theoretical elegance, but from their authors' "capacity to convince us that what they say is a result of their having actually penetrated . . . another form of life, of having . . . truly 'been there'" (pp. 4-5). Working from that proposition, Geertz sets out to examine the rhetorical techniques whereby the anthropological author is presented in the text as having been there, in the field, as well as how the field itself, the cultural actuality of others' lives, is convincingly rendered in prose.

To achieve this agenda, Geertz devotes a chapter to each of four exemplary anthropological authors: Claude Levi-Strauss, E. E. Evans-Pritchard, Bronislaw Malinowski, and Ruth Benedict. His chapter on Levi-Strauss presents a cogent reading of a difficult thinker's work, a reading developed more fully by Geertz in an earlier essay,<sup>4</sup> but here worked out specifically with respect to Levi-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques*. "Slide Show: Evans-Pritchard's African Transparencies" pays close attention to Evans-Pritchard's literary realism, which Geertz attributes to the author's ability to construct "visualizable" descriptions (p. 64). In his chapter on Malinowski, Geertz examines the rhetorical difficulties of constructing an anthropological persona who is at once an empathic, engaged participant and a detached, objective scientist. "Us/Not-Us: Benedict's Travels" argues that despite her occasional reliance on scientific rhetoric, Benedict was above all a Swiftian satirist whose probing of apparently strange customs elsewhere derived from a fierce intent to criticize the absurdities of her own world. This chapter on

Benedict, which goes to the heart of her oft-overlooked comparative hermeneutic, is, in my opinion, the best of the four; but readers will find much to admire in each of the other chapters.

Beyond the analysis of specific authors, *Works and Lives* hints at Geertz's literary epistemology, his underlying notions of what and how ethnographic writing communicates about cultures. With respect to such philosophical underpinnings, Geertz's position remains as he outlined it in the 1973 essay mentioned above. Anthropological writing is art. It is only the longstanding (since Plato!) ascendancy of a confused mimetic realism—seeking to describe reality in a language that matches it perfectly—that makes the fictional quality of all writing seem a threat to the possibility of knowledge. But if it cannot imitate reality, what, then, does anthropological art do? According to Geertz, it “inscribe[s] a present,” it “convey[s] in words ‘what it is like’ to be somewhat specific in the lifeline of the world.” “[E]thnography . . . is above all a rendering of the actual, a vitality phrased.” In sum, anthropological writing remains tied to the fieldworker's experience, persuasively rendered in an “account” that even postmodern readers will find “authentic” (p. 143).

This recourse to the language of authenticity comes as a surprise after Geertz's rejection of mimetic realism. It is even more surprising given his insistence that anthropological writing is always entangled in the cultural categories of its authors. This he calls “the un-get-roundable fact that all ethnographical descriptions are homemade, that they are the describer's descriptions, not those of the described” (pp. 144-145). Granting that proposition, one can ask wherein the authenticity of an “authentic account” resides: is it a function of the ethnographer's experience, or of “native” experiences rendered in ethnographic writing? Indeed, what, epistemologically speaking, is involved in a “rendering of the actual”? To whose actuality does Geertz's phrase refer? Geertz himself acknowledges that authenticity is no longer easy to achieve, given the dynamics of the post-colonial situation, where “natives” are readers, even authors, of anthropological texts, and, as such, able to dispute the authenticity of outsiders' accounts of their culture. One wonders, then, if it is still possible to ground narrative authority in the ethnographer's experience.

But there is another strand to Geertz's literary epistemology. The purpose of ethnographic writing is to communicate differences, or to communicate between differences; it “enabl[es] conversation across societal lines” (p. 147). Geertz suggests that this task has changed since the days of the author-ancestors, who could presuppose a world of neatly delimited, unproblematically separated cultures. In the post-colonial world, such an assumption is no longer possible. People of differing cultures routinely interact and communicate, living as neighbors in ethnically diverse cities, participating (however unequally) in a global economy, their traditions often packaged and marketed by a worldwide tourist industry. Yet cultural differences among peoples thus linked remain as difficult to construe as they ever were. Thus the situation in which the anthropologist's art is practiced has changed. But if intercultural communication remains a worthy endeavor, then anthropologists cannot, and will not wish to, escape what Geertz calls “the burden of authorship” (p. 146), though some may conceive it in terms other than authenticity and experience.

#### NOTES

1. Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 3-30.



3. James Clifford, "On Ethnographic Authority," *Representations* 1 (1983): 118-146.
  4. Clifford Geertz, "The Cerebral Savage: On the Work of Claude Levi-Strauss," *Encounter* 28.4 (April 1967): 25-32. (Reprinted in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, pp. 345-359.)
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**Robert Fishman.** *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia.* (New York: Basic Books, 1987). 224 pp. \$19.95 (cloth) (Reviewed by W. Scott Haine)

Utopia usually refers to the a great thinker's vision of an ideal society. Robert Fishman, an urban historian, has already studied utopian thinking in this conventional fashion in his first book, *Urban Utopias in the Twentieth Century: Ebenezer Howard, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Le Corbusier*.<sup>1</sup> In his new book, he argues imaginatively and persuasively that the term can be fruitfully applied to the development of the English and American middle-class suburb over the last two centuries. By using the term "utopia," he captures the radical, visionary, and ultimately contradictory nature of the suburban ideal. This innovative book offers the first critical history of suburbia, a phenomenon too often studied ahistorically.

Rather than the work of a few thinkers, Fishman emphasizes that suburbia was a "collective creation" of the Anglo-American middle-class elite (bankers, merchants, and manufacturers). Suburbia arose through a process of trial and error between 1750-1950. It represented a radical break from traditional urban development for a number of reasons: the periphery rather than the city center became the privileged site of residence, the work place became separated from the home, neighborhoods were now segregated according to social class, and the distinction between city and country became thoroughly blurred. The result was not only the creation of a new type of community but also a profound alteration of the city. Thus, Fishman views suburbia not only in a historical but also in an urban context.

Fishman forcefully argues, in revisionist fashion, that suburbia was an English, rather than American creation. Moreover, the mixed motives that have always driven suburbanization, the search for a harmonious blend of nature and culture and the desire to escape urban problems, first appeared in England. In the late eighteenth century, Clapham, a former agricultural community close to London, became the residence of many of the elite of the Evangelical movement. William Wilberforce, already famous as a great crusader against slavery and immorality, should, from now on, also be associated with the rise of the suburban ideal. The villas the Evangelicals built had a domestic architecture that perfectly complemented their domestic ideology. In this "proper paradise," mothers and their children, amidst pastoral surroundings in spacious homes, were separated from the sinful city. If a positive ideal sparked the first suburbanization in London, fear of the slums populated by an emerging and militant working class drove the Manchester middle class to desert the central city. Unlike London, Manchester's suburbanization produced almost complete class segregation. Moreover, in these fortress-like houses, such as that of Richard Cobden the industrialist and politician, the floor plans separated the genders and ages.

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