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ARE ETHNOGRAPHIES  
“JUST-SO” STORIES?

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Some anthropologists think that ethnographies are “just so” stories, not necessarily to be believed as true. I don’t agree. Here is why.

Skarp-Hedin leapt across the river, kept his footing as he hit the ice on the other side, went into a glide, and swooped down on Thrain, swinging an axe to split his head open to the jaw bone and spill Thrain’s back teeth onto the ice. Skarp-Hedin didn’t even slow down. One man threw a shield at him, but he jumped up and over it and just kept on going. Then Skarp-Hedin’s four brothers came running up and killed three of Thrain’s friends.

They let four of the young people who were in Thrain’s group go because Skarp-Hedin couldn’t bring himself to kill them. (Skarp-Hedin and his brothers were irritated at Thrain and his followers for insulting them.) Later on, the young men Skarp-Hedin didn’t want to kill helped burn Skarp-Hedin and his brothers and father and mother in their house, but not before Skarp-Hedin had gouged out one man’s eye with Thrain’s back tooth, which he had saved from that day on the ice.

This story could be from a tabloid newspaper you see at the check-out counter at the grocery store or from a slasher movie. But it isn’t. Here is another story.

There is a beautiful girl named Helga. When she is twelve, her father takes in a boy of the same age who doesn’t get along with his own father. Helga and the boy, Gunnlaug, fall madly in love with each other. When Gunnlaug turns eighteen he goes abroad to make his name and fortune, and Helga’s father agrees that he won’t make her marry anyone else for three years. Gunnlaug travels all over northern Europe composing poems for kings and raiding and pillaging. Because of a dispute over poetry he makes a lifelong enemy of another poet, named Hrafn. Gunnlaug gets delayed, and by the time he gets home more than the three years have passed and his enemy has married Helga.

Their families won’t let them kill each other in a duel, so they agree to fight it out somewhere else. Gunnlaug manages to visit Helga a few times and gives her a cloak that a king had given him. He and Hrafn travel around until finally they meet, have a long and bloody fight, and both die. Helga now has no husband and no boyfriend. Her father finds another poet for her to marry, and she has some children with this man but never really loves him because she can never get her first love, Gunnlaug, out of her mind. Finally, she catches an epidemic disease. One day she lays her head in her husband’s lap, has someone get the cloak Gunnlaug had given her, and dies holding it.

Are these true stories? Nobody knows. They are stories that Icelanders wrote in the thirteenth century as part of their sagas about things that were supposed to have happened two or three hundred years before. The first is from *Njal's* saga and the second is from *Gunnlaug's* saga.<sup>1</sup> Nobody even knows who wrote the sagas. All we know is that they were written in Icelandic. If these slasher-romances aren't true stories—and nobody can tell if they are true—why should we pay attention to them, especially in anthropology?

Whatever else these stories are, they are cultural artifacts, just as much as a 1965 Chevy, a hand axe, or an episode of *Days of Our Lives* is a cultural artifact. If we want to learn about a culture, we study its artifacts, especially the ones that say something about social relations and the culture itself. But if someone made up the stories, what can they tell us about the culture or the society?

The imagination cannot go beyond culture. All of us are limited by our cultures. Our cultures define who we are and how we are, what we do, what we think and how we think. So, if you work this equation backward, you can learn a lot about a culture from looking at its artifacts, especially artifacts such as literature that talk about the culture itself.

We learn, for instance, that Icelandic people would kill each other over an insult, or even an imagined insult. We learn that they traveled abroad, raided, traded, made poetry, and fell in love. We learn that fathers could make daughters get married against their will, and many other details of the culture of medieval Iceland.

These are stories in books, and I like them as stories as well as for what they can tell us about medieval Iceland. I believe that we can use fiction for ethnography. If you want to learn about people, read their stories and you will see their culture reflected in the authors' imaginations. This is one of the things Ruth Benedict did in her perceptive study of Japanese culture "at a distance," *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*.<sup>2</sup> This is what you do in your literature classes. Read Shakespeare's plays and you see a different culture. The manufactured parts of stories are names and events; the culturally-given parts are motivations, emotions, judgments, social relations, and settings. To be good, fiction has to be true. The reason we can use fiction for ethnography is that everyone's imagination is a product of his or her culture, a reflection of the culture, so we can see the culture through the fictions.

The wrenching part of anthropology, what some people call culture shock, is being in places where people are doing things that we cannot imagine. You cannot imagine something you have never

heard about or seen or done. But all of a sudden there you are, as anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski was in the second decade of the twentieth century, in a canoe with a bunch of men blowing smoke and making magic to make things work out right.<sup>3</sup> The reason you are on this dangerous voyage in the middle of the ocean in a dugout canoe is that these men want to trade some shell bracelets for some necklaces on another island. To you it is all some kind of costume jewelry, but to them every individual piece has a history and a value. Their sense of prestige hangs on the trades they make, just as a medieval Icelander's prestige hung on never tolerating an insult, or yours hangs on the kind of car you drive, your credit rating, the clothes you wear, the music you listen to, who you date, and how you smell.

Blowing smoke and making magic to get a canoe across the ocean does not make sense to us. But it made sense to Trobriand Islanders when Malinowski was there early in the twentieth century. It was beyond his imagination, but it was an ordinary part of Trobriand culture.

Sometimes it is even more wrenching to come back to your own country and see that everything you thought was "just the way people do things" is really just another culture, another kind of imaginary construct that doesn't make that much sense.

When you think about it, many of the things we take for granted are pretty silly. Think about money, for example. Paper? Backed by the U.S. government? The only reason we can use money is that we all agree to believe that it has value. These days you can't even trade it for silver or gold, and when you think about it, what is the use of gold except for making wire and jewelry? Money is an incredible leap of the imagination, but an everyday part of our culture. And it gets even weirder than that. There are a lot of people who make a living just by pushing money from one place to another. And even stranger, they don't even push the actual money; they just enter figures in computers and things happen, and for this they make a nice living—making fictions of fictions. Stocks and bonds are stranger yet. You can take whole courses on how this stuff works in your school of business or economics department; you can learn all of the esoteric language and how to make a living doing this kind of magic. You can get a degree in it. It might seem strange to think of getting a B.A. in magic, but that's what business schools do. To anthropologists, it is just another kind of blowing smoke.

When people's assumptions are different from ours, we don't understand their motives, judgments, or sense of propriety. That is

where anthropology comes in—trying to understand other people as well as ourselves.

So everything is a cultural artifact. That is one of the important lessons of anthropology. But if everything is a cultural artifact, isn't anthropology just another cultural artifact, like money, a '65 Chevy, a soap opera, or an Icelandic saga?

Whatever you can say about sagas, soap operas, and anthropology, a '65 Chevy will run. If it doesn't you can fix it so it will. There is a bottom line with some things: They work or they don't. You can try teleportation all you want, but if you want to get some place fast you will buy an airplane ticket. Airplanes work. So do computers. Cars, computers, and airplanes are all the result of scientific knowledge. So scientific knowledge must be "culture-free," right?

Wrong. Even science is a cultural artifact—something we make up, something we imagine. How do we know that? Because science changes from time to time and place to place. European science used to tell us that the earth was at the center of the universe and the sun went around it. European scientists didn't record any new stars. They couldn't. God made the heavens and the earth as they were and they did not change. Everyone knew that. If you saw what you thought was a new star, it was just one you had missed before. The Chinese, on the other hand, were looking at the heavens for signs and portents. They did not assume the heavens were changeless; they were looking for changes, and they saw and recorded new stars that astronomers today classify as novae.

Then an astrologer with strange religious ideas, a man named Copernicus, had the idea that the sun was at the center of the system. Everyone thought he was nuts until it turned out he could make a calendar that kept track of holidays better than the Ptolemaic system could. Easter stayed in the spring and Christmas stayed in the winter instead of straying all over the seasons. The Church wanted a consistent calendar, so they liked this calendar and the rest of the solar system came in on its coat tails. Evidence? There wasn't any evidence one way or the other. In terms of observations you could make at the time, the Copernican system didn't work any better than the old Ptolemaic one that put the earth at the center of everything. Facts did not determine the choice. Imagination—culture—is stronger than facts.

But people who navigated with the Ptolemaic system could get where they wanted to go. It worked. It probably couldn't get them to the moon, but it could get them from Europe to America or Asia and that is what counted in those days. It will work as well today as it

did then for navigation—as long as you don’t leave our planet. The point is that just because something works does not necessarily mean that the ideas it is based on are correct. Even the pragmatic test of “working” is not always a good guide to truth. So what is left?

The answer is uncomfortable, but one that you might as well get accustomed to: Nothing is left. Everything we can think of, including science, is a cultural artifact. We cannot escape that. Culture is part of our being just as surely as is walking on two feet and talking and having an opposable thumb. It is built and bred into us and has been part of our evolutionary history since we walked out of Olduvai gorge or wherever we originated in our homeland in Africa.

What we try to do in anthropology is to move beyond our own cultures and understand other cultures. We try to do that in a scientific way. So what kind of artifact is science? It strives for reliable and valid knowledge. Valid means that we observe and measure what we think we are observing and measuring. Do Scholastic Aptitude Tests or entrance examinations really predict your college grades? If they do, they are valid. What do grades measure? Reliability means that anyone else would see and describe the same things if they did the same things. Science is cultural because the very terms for judging reliability and validity are cultural, thus anthropology is a cultural artifact.

This is not surprising when you think about it. But some anthropologists were very surprised when they figured it out. A long time ago Aristotle wrote about rhetoric. These anthropologists discovered that all arguments are rhetorical, that they are all cultural artifacts. They discovered that Malinowski used rhetoric—that he was a writer. They acted like this was a big discovery and were very proud of themselves for making it, like the character in Moliere’s play who learns that he has been speaking prose all his life.

In 1922, Malinowski said he was constructing interpretations of the *kula*, the trading of necklaces and shell arm bands; he made the analogy to a physicist constructing a theory from experimental data that everyone can understand but that falls into place when the physicist makes a consistent interpretation, a story. Malinowski was implying that he, like the physicist (a scientist), was constructing interpretations to help people understand things.<sup>4</sup>

In 1973, Clifford Geertz said he discovered that anthropological writings are interpretations, cultural artifacts, something anthropologists make, and he said they were fictions because they are cultural constructs.<sup>5</sup> (You should read some of Geertz’s writings, just because

anthropologists talk about him a lot. But be warned that Geertz gets confusing. If you find yourself scratching your head and wondering what he means, don't worry. He writes as if he wants to confuse you. And so he does.) He went on to say that these fictions are not untrue; they are just cultural artifacts, something someone makes, and in that sense they are just like any other kind of cultural artifact.

About ten years later, James Clifford and George Marcus got some anthropologists and other people together to talk about these things, and published a book of their essays in 1986.<sup>6</sup> In the introduction, Clifford discusses the idea of ethnographies as fiction, something made, and says they are not false, just incomplete—not unreal, just culturally determined. Some of the words he and the other anthropologists use are “irony,” “hegemonic,” “discourse,” “trope,” “interpretation,” “hermeneutics,” “subjectivity,” “conflate” “elide” and “privilege” (as a verb).

Some of these anthropologists call themselves postmodernists. Don't worry if you haven't figured out exactly what that means; they don't want you to, so you are not likely to. Think of it as more of a riddle than a question, or a zen koan whose answer you aren't supposed to understand anyway. The difference is that a zen master will promise you enlightenment if you stick with it and think about the riddle. Enlightenment is another cultural construct. But the postmodernists only promise more confusion. They are in the business of making confusion, not trying to understand it. When they pose you a riddle, if you know it, you know it, and if not, then you are in outer darkness. I am telling you that outer darkness is an “OK” place to be, and that we have to remember now and then to ask whether the emperor has any clothes.

In 1990, Katherine Hales wrote a book about chaos theory.<sup>7</sup> She had studied chemistry and then English, so she knew something about scientific subjects as well as literature. Talking about postmodernists in literature, she asked about what she called the political economy of their discipline, the political and economic conditions of the people who write literary criticism. If there is only one correct view, she pointed out, these people would be out of business in no time flat. But if there are many equivalent views, none any better than the others, then they can keep on cranking out literary criticism and debating about how to do it until the cows come home. Maybe it is the same for postmodernism in anthropology.

Geertz recognizes the problem. You cannot be systematic about interpretations; if you can't be systematic, you can't evaluate them. It's like trying to figure out how to get an “A” in a course if nobody

will tell you how you are being graded. Nobody wants to talk about how to grade interpretations. So they are all equally good. Listen to Geertz:

For a field of study which, however timidly (though I, myself, am not timid about the matter at all), asserts itself to be a science, this just will not do. There is no reason why the conceptual structure of a cultural interpretation should be any less formulable, and thus less susceptible to explicit canons of appraisal, than that of, say, a biological observation or a physical experiment.

So far so good, and we think Geertz is right on track, but now comes the punch line to his joke:

...no reason except that the terms of which such formulations can be cast are, if not wholly nonexistent, very nearly so. We are reduced to insinuating theories because we lack the power to state them.<sup>8</sup>

Allow me to interpret. It would be nice to know how to grade interpretations, but we don't know how. So we don't. Instead of having theories, we guess.

If all stories are equivalent, how can we choose among them? Comparing personal interpretations is fundamentally undemocratic because, as Geertz suggested, the way to choose is to yield to the authority of the person who presents the interpretation. This person presents the interpretation and he or she is...what? The most powerful? The loudest? The most fashionable? However, while Geertz's suggestion at first looks very liberal—it seems to say "entertain every point of view"—it really means "take my word for it and don't be critical or ask questions." On the other hand, if all interpretations are equally legitimate, then they might as well all be fiction.

If fiction can be ethnography and ethnography is fiction, can there be fictional ethnographies? There can be and there are, and it is something anthropologists talk about and even argue about. Maybe the most famous of these are the writings of Carlos Castaneda, who started with *The Teachings of Don Juan, A Yaqui Way of Knowledge*, which was published in 1968.<sup>9</sup> This was such a success that he went on to publish several others in the same vein. For a while there was a debate about whether Castaneda's books were "true."

Some people pointed out that he must have copied from well-known books about shamans and mysticism because of parallels in

the texts. Others argued that the correspondences were universals of shamanic experience. Richard De Mille collected a number of assessments of Castaneda's work in 1980.<sup>10</sup> De Mille distinguishes between validity and authenticity. Validity means that a story corresponds to what we think we know, similar to the idea of validity for judging scientific work. New stars were not valid to early European astronomers, but they were to Chinese astronomers because of their different systems of reference—frameworks for validity, which are culturally variable. Authenticity means whether the events happened the way the stories say they did.

Did Skarp-Hedin really chop Thrain's teeth out of his head on the ice? The story is valid because it matches what we know about medieval Iceland and other such societies, but we don't know if it is authentic. Were Galileo's telescopic observations of the heavens accurate (authentic)? Check them for yourself. Anyone can do it. Science is democratic; it doesn't hide or confuse things.

Were Castaneda's stories authentic? It is more difficult to determine whether he really knew Don Juan. It isn't as simple as repeating an experiment or observation.

Because there are many authentic and valid ethnographic reports in libraries and books, De Mille suggested that people can use them to concoct valid but inauthentic reports. When you write a term paper, you cite your sources and do not pretend that you are the one who studied diet in China or marriage customs in India or religion in Peru. You and your professor are probably equally glad just to have the paper handed in by the due date without a five-year delay for you to go to the place, learn the language, and do the study yourself. You would have to take an incomplete for half a decade. That is what books are good for. But they require honest use. You get an "F" on your term paper if you plagiarize—another one of those cultural things.

When you read an ethnography, how do you know it is true? How do you know the author didn't make it up, as Castaneda did? The main reason is that the writer says, "I was there; this is based on my experience, on what I saw and heard." That experience is the writer's authority, the reason to believe what the writer says. But that is what Castaneda said to claim ethnographic authority, and he was not writing ethnography. In the 1986 book that Clifford and Marcus edited is a piece by Mary Louise Pratt of Stanford's Spanish and Portuguese Department. Pratt points out that you can write an accurate account of life in another culture without ever having been there.<sup>11</sup> Ruth Benedict did. And I have never been to medieval

Iceland, but I wrote a book about it.<sup>12</sup> Pratt wonders why there was a big flap in anthropology journals over a book, by Florinda Donner, *Shabono*, published in 1982.<sup>13</sup> Was it fiction based on ethnographies and other sources like Castaneda's works, or was it ethnography?

Pratt sees the threat to anthropologists in the missing link, the "being there" that gives ethnographers the "authority" to say they have given you an authentic account. I think the use of the word "authority" for this meaning is interesting, because an appeal to authority, in a somewhat different sense, is the only way to judge stories that are not scientific.

Pratt goes on to talk about how anthropologists establish that they were there, that their accounts are authentic. This is what all scientists do. Galileo said he looked through a telescope and this is what he saw. His authority, his claim to authenticity, came from his having looked through the telescope. If you don't believe him, you can read other books by other people who have looked through telescopes, look at their photos or drawings, or look through a telescope yourself. If other people cannot see the same things, the observations are not reliable. And so it is for ethnography.

Pratt says that ethnographic writing is boring. How, she wonders, could such interesting people doing such interesting things produce such dull books? Boredom, of course, is self-generated. It isn't in what we see but in how we respond to it. Have you ever tried to explain why you were fascinated by an experiment you did in chemistry lab to someone who was so bored with science that he didn't even want to discuss it? If people are bored with something, we can't change their minds about it. It's like what they say about trying to teach pigs to sing. It is a waste of your time and it irritates the pig. People of the English persuasion have tried to explain cricket to me, but I would just as soon watch paint dry.

I must confess that I find some art and some ethnography boring and some exciting. I never could get into *Gravety's Rainbow*, though my wife swears by it. I know Joyce's *Ulysses* is a great work, but I can't get into it. Or Jane Austen. But I once spent an afternoon absorbed in an ethnography of Timbuktu.

Fiction writers are obliged to try not to bore their readers; ethnographers can be irritatingly indifferent to their audience and use the most atrocious obfuscatory language. Among the most obfuscatory and boring writers of modern anthropology, by the way, are those who discovered that they were writing rhetoric. Richard de Mille suggests that Castaneda perpetrated his hoaxes because the competition was too great in the fiction market.

Castaneda's stories are short on plot, lack detail, have unconvincing characters who never develop and who show stereotyped emotions, and have nothing in the way of human relations. That is not good fiction—it would never sell—but it makes pretty good reading as fact because readers love supposedly true adventures, even if they aren't well written.

In fiction, the ideas of truth are a little different, and that is why Pratt didn't understand the big flap about authenticity in anthropology. John Gardner, in his book about writing, *The Art of Fiction*,<sup>14</sup> suggests that telling truth in fiction can mean one of several things: being factually correct, being coherent so that it does not feel like lying, or affirming a moral truth about human existence. Like Pratt, he considers authenticity to be trivial, except in creating an appearance of truth that makes a story interesting and compelling (what literary people call "verisimilitude"). He regards validity—making the story fit a cultural framework—as more important. Universal morality he appreciates as the highest form of truth, the goal of art.

This highest truth, as any anthropologist will tell you, is cultural. But reality is just there. Science is the job of trying to match the two. Skarp-Hedin was affirming a truth when he chopped out Thrain's teeth, but his actions would not be considered quite so praiseworthy today. Skarp-Hedin would wind up pleading insanity and hoping to get committed to an asylum rather than death row. But to know that, we have to know something about our culture and other cultures; and to know those things, we have to describe and understand them; and to do that, we have to tell truth as best we can, as Galileo did. Other people and their actions, thoughts, words, and deeds are realities that anthropologists try to understand.

Ethnographers, if they are honest and authentic, must be willing to say, "If you don't believe our stories you can go there yourself and see for yourself." They have to believe that if you do what they did you will see the same things. So the stories to establish authenticity are more than just figures of speech or rhetorical tactics or ploys—tropes, as they say—or they are no less so than any other such rhetoric of any scientific report. And to say that everything is a trope is about as enlightening as to say that we speak in prose. Sometimes people do go and check others' work, and sometimes, though not all the time, it leads to disputes about who was using the better telescope because different people may present equally valid and equally authentic but different pictures of what they saw.

Try it out sometime. You and two of your friends each get cameras and all go to an event like a wedding or a carnival or a graduation—anything at all. Then compare the pictures you took. You all will have been at the same place with the same people, but I will bet that you each took different pictures to emphasize different things. This is one reason different anthropologists can tell different stories—they concentrate on different things. (This may be what was at stake in the differences between Oscar Lewis and Robert Redfield in their understandings of Mexican peasant life.)<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, maybe you went to different weddings and one was in Texas and the other in New Jersey. Or maybe you are comparing pictures from this year's wedding with your grandfather's wedding. There can also be differences of time and location.

The more precisely you can tell people what you did, the better they can try to see things the way you saw them. That is the reason anthropologists have to spend some time on methodology—talking about how they know what they are talking about (to establish reliability), as well as theory. Methodology is the framework for validity.

If everything is a cultural construct and all ethnographic accounts are stories like any other kind of science, does it make any difference whether we make them up in libraries or in some foreign place? Isn't one story as good as another?

Remember that inauthentic ethnographies depend on authentic ones. The only reason people can make up ethnography in a library is that someone did the real job of description before. Without that kind of aid they could not move beyond the imaginative limits of their own culture and would have to write poor fiction rather than fake ethnography.

How you judge a story depends on what you want it for. If its only job is to amuse you, then popular television writing will win over any academic or scientific writing any day of the week. That is what makes popular writing and television popular. Maybe that is why academic writers are so poorly paid. If you are trying to get from Europe to America or Asia, or from the earth to the moon, you need a different kind of story. If you want the kind of story that makes a computer work, you don't ask how amusing it is, you ask how well it works.

And so it is for understanding other cultures and your own culture. That which leaves you with the most authentic and valid account is the best ethnography. That is the ethnography upon which you can base a sound search for those higher truths. Ask any-

one who has tried to understand your culture and its moral truths. Talk to some foreign students as they are getting used to American ways and see what they tell you. You will be surprised at what surprises them.

One young woman confided to me her amusement on hearing at an orientation session that Americans were very conscious of smells in their love lives. She laughed as she regaled me with stories she had heard and this whole new dimension of social relations she had never thought about before. In the United States, that is the foundation for a whole neurosis and the industry based on it. While Icelanders think Americans silly to bathe every day, Thai think Americans uncouth for bathing only once a day.

When you see yourself through others' eyes, you never see what you thought you would see, what you see through your own eyes. Watching yourself in a video is an alienating experience. You don't look like you thought you would. The person holding the camera didn't see things the way you saw them.

Horace Miner wrote an essay called "Body Ritual among the Nacirema," which was published in 1958 in the *American Anthropologist*.<sup>16</sup> "Nacirema" is "American" spelled backwards. In the article he describes how Americans brush their teeth as he imagines an anthropologist might describe this ritual. It seems strange because he puts it in a different context than we do when we brush our teeth. So ethnographic accounts often have an air of strangeness about them to the people they describe. Different people see things differently—that is one of the great lessons of anthropology. Texans, for instance, didn't much like Michener's treatment of their state in his novel. But Texans didn't like Ferber's *Giant* either. Only a Texan, they argue, can really understand the uniqueness of that people and that land. Anything that doesn't agree with our own self images, anything that doesn't confirm the rightness of our own prejudices and opinions, we are likely to dismiss as wrongheaded at worst or innocent fiction at best. Texans say they are heirs to a proud historical tradition, while others see this kind of attitude as boorish, ethnocentric bigotry.

If you are an athlete and your coach tells you how to improve your stroke, your serve, the swing of your golf club, your gait when you are running, or how to hold the bat to hit the ball, you can view the tapes, concede that you don't look to others as you imagined you did, and listen to your coach's advice. Your game will improve. Or you can insist that your view is the only right one and suffer the consequences. It is your choice. It is the same in music, writing, art, com-

puter science, engineering...you name it. And it is our choice. We may not like what de Toqueville said about America, but it might help us to listen, whether we like the story or not, whether it is amusing or not.

Three of my favorite writers died on motorcycles. One of them, C. Wright Mills, was a sociologist. He wrote that ordinary people felt they were living in traps because of large social forces beyond their control. To understand a person's life or the history of his or her society, you have to understand both together.<sup>17</sup> Another, John Gardner, wrote fiction and also wrote about writing fiction. He wrote that fiction seeks out truth. We cannot sort universals into moral codes, but fiction interests us because it helps us learn how the world works, how we and all other human beings can resolve conflicts we share, what values we agree with, and what the moral risks are. He said that a writer who cannot distinguish truth from a peanut-butter sandwich can't write good fiction.<sup>18</sup> The third, T. E. Lawrence, wrote something that was sociology, fiction, history, and autobiography as well.<sup>19</sup> All three of these men met the same end. Maybe we should learn to wear helmets when we get on motorcycles.

Some of my favorite writers are still alive. Halldor Laxness is an Icelandic novelist who wrote with such precision that I once despaired that he left nothing for anthropologists to do—regarding Iceland, at least.<sup>20</sup> Like Texans, Icelanders didn't much like his writing, until he won a Nobel prize. Then it was OK because foreigners thought it was good. Richard Condon wrote the definitive work on economics in his novel *Money Is Love*.<sup>21</sup> Miles Richardson is an anthropologist who captured what it is to be an anthropologist.<sup>22</sup>

Richardson talks about how he became an anthropologist and how anthropologists accuse each other of every imaginable sin. He wonders how to explain such accusations when they contrast so with the image of anthropologists as people who are sympathetic to differences. He talks about doing fieldwork and the conditions of fieldwork—that we have to drop the idea that the world is the same as it was for Malinowski seventy years ago. We have to accept the contemporary world on its own terms. When we do this, we can begin to see clearly, we can listen carefully, and we can hear what we must. There are different ways to listen, as there are different ways to take photographs. We can be detached; we can be revolutionaries, bureaucrats, apologists. There are a lot of ambiguities because of the differences in power among people and among peoples and countries.

How can we get anything out of this enterprise besides a bunch of equally good if not equally entertaining “just-so” stories? Richardson says that there is another way to think of anthropology—something like what Gardner had in mind for writers: They are myth-tellers, people who stand on the edge of the society in the outer darkness, away from the hot glow of the campfires that comfort us, and tell the myth of humanity with skill and passion. We cannot falsify what we are. We work with all the pieces of the puzzles we have: what we can develop, what our predecessors developed, what our students are developing. We try to understand it all. We stand between the most and the least powerful social orders and feel the tensions. To tell the story well, Richardson says, we need the passion of the radical, the detachment of the scientist, and the practicality of the liberal. That is our job, he concludes—to tell the human story, to tell it well, to tell it truly.

But why does Richardson call it a myth, this story of our selves and our fellow humans? Isn't it a “just-so” story, along with all the other myths science banishes with its valid and reliable analyses? He calls the story of humanity a myth not because it is untrue but because it reaches for that higher truth that Gardner spoke of. Such myths are true. Anthropology tells those stories, and it is up to us to tell them well and truly.

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## NOTES

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1. Anonymous, *Njal's Saga*, trans. Magnus Maganusson and Hermann Pálsson (New York: Penguin, 1960); Anonymous, *The Saga of Gunnlaugur Snake's Tongue with an Essay on the Structure and Translation of the Saga*, trans E. Paul Durrenberger and Dorothy Durrenberger (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1992).
2. Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1946).
3. Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1984; originally published in 1922).
4. Ibid.
5. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

6. James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).
7. Katherine N. Hayles, *Chaos Bound: Orderly Disorder in Contemporary Literature and Science* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).
8. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, p. 24.
9. Carlos Castaneda, *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968).
10. Richard De Mille, *The Don Juan Papers: Further Castaneda Controversies* (1980; reprint Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1992).
11. Mary Louise Pratt, "Fieldwork in Common Places," in James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 27–50.
12. E. Paul Durrenberger, *The Dynamics of Medieval Iceland: Political Economy and Literature* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992).
13. Florinda Donner, *Shabono: A True Adventure in the Remote and Magical Heart of the South American Jungle* (New York: Laurel Books, 1982).
14. John Gardner, *The Art of Fiction* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984).
15. Robert Redfield, *Tepoztlán, a Mexican Village: A Study of Folk Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1930); Oscar Lewis, *Life in a Mexican Village: Tepoztlán Restudied* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1951).
16. Horace Miner, "Body Ritual among the Nacirema," *American Anthropologist* 58 (1956): 503–507.
17. C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959).
18. Gardner, *The Art of Fiction*.
19. T. E. Lawrence, *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1938).
20. Halldor Laxness, *Salka Valka*, trans. F. H. Lyon (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1936); Halldor Laxness, *Independent People* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1946).
21. Richard Condon, *Money Is Love* (New York: Dial Press, 1975).
22. Miles Richardson, *Cry Lonesome and Other Accounts of the Anthropologist's Project* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990).

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## SUGGESTED READINGS

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- Condon, Richard. *Money Is Love*. New York: Dial Press, 1975. A novel that treats the mysteries of money and economic systems. Many of Condon's other novels are equally interesting.
- Durrenberger, E. Paul. *The Dynamics of Medieval Iceland: Political Economy and Literature*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992. Discusses the relationships between politics, economics, and literature in medieval Iceland.
- Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books, 1973. Not a very good book, definitely not well written, but anthropologists talk about it a lot. Read it some time if you want to see what they are talking about.
- Hayles, Katherine N. *Chaos Bound: Orderly Disorder in Contemporary Literature and Science*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990. Discusses chaos theory.
- Kuhn, Thomas S. *The Copernican Revolution: Planetary Astronomy in the Development of Western Thought*. New York: Vintage Books, 1957. Accessible discussion of astronomy in European cultures. Shows how Ptolemaic astronomy made sense with the observations they had at that time and how sun-centered theories made no more sense than earth-centered ones. This is a good portrayal of the relationship between facts and theories and how ideas about astronomy influenced other areas of thought. Kuhn later wrote the influential book *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962.
- Malinowski, Bronislaw. *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea*. 1922; reprint Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1984. Better than you might guess as a book just to read and a classic of anthropology. Good summer vacation book.
- Mills, C. Wright. *The Sociological Imagination*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1959. Mills is a good writer. His work is generally accessible, no nonsense, to the point, sensible, and necessary reading for anyone going on in anthropology or any social science.
- Richardson, Miles. *Cry Lonesome and Other Accounts of the Anthropologist's Project*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990. The best account of what it is like to be an anthropologist.

Krystal Long September 30, 2016 ANT-220 Are Ethnographies "Just So" Stories? 1. Define the term Cultural Artifact . Why does Durrenberger define anthropology as a "Cultural Artifact"? a. Cultural Artifact: An item that, when found, reveals valuable information about the society that made or used it. b. Durrenberger says, "If we want to learn about a culture, we study its artifacts, especially the ones that say something about social relations and the culture itself". I think the reason he defines Anthropology as a cultural artifact is because the definition of Anthropology and cultur Mr. Kipling's Just So Stories is the only recent original book for children whose standing in this connection appears to be fairly sure. It does for very little children much what the Jungle Books did for older ones. It is artfully artless, in its themes, in its repetitions, in its habitual limitation, and occasional abeyance, of adult humor. It strikes a child as the kind of yarn his father or uncle might have spun if he had just happened to think of it; and it has, like all good fairy-business, a sound core of philosophy. Children might like the book just as well, at first, if it lacked