

Introduction

Cultural anthropologists have been busy defining the ethics of "understanding others." The innocence of the eye in fieldwork has been called into question. Naive scientism, which has believed in the neutrality of describing the "other" culture chosen as a "field of research," has been heavily criticized. What had been praised as scholarly contributions have been shown to reveal hidden desires of domination. The power structure implied in the hierarchy between the observer and the observed can no longer be ignored. Instead of being a privileged observer, the anthropologist at work is observed with, or without, curiosity by the community of people who welcome, or refuse, him/her.

This shift in observation has created a drastic cognition crisis with regard to ways of "understanding others." Experimental ethnographers have attempted to reproduce dialogues with informants as constituting their immediate field experience. But in so doing, this has revealed instead the fictionality of the "immediacy." Archeological ethnographers have tried to reexamine the practices/customs of their own "ancestors," but accusing one's own ancestors does not necessarily lead one to be exonerated from one's own "crime". In lieu of such "autopsy," performing ethnographers have theatricalized the "crime" by ostentatiously demonstrating the "criminality" of the act of "rewriting culture," but this self-reflexive self-accusation is simply a reversed self-justification played out in a fictional and self-fabricated lawsuit conducted as a court trial. By introducing a "different mirror," seen from the other side, reverse anthropologists have also revealed the limits of reciprocity and the incompatibility of crossing gazes. The syndrome of these crises is spreading nowadays irrevocably over all branches of the tree of humanities.

What is wrong with these vicious circles of introspection? Surely the search for a "politically correct" way of describing other cultures implies the positionality of the describer. And since there is no neutral describer, the question becomes one of for whom the information is encoded and to whom it is sent. If the destination is confined only to a community of specialists, the issue comes to a dead end. The question remains, then--who is entitled to represent which culture? However, it is a question of taking an essentialist position. Are "Westerners" not qualified to "understand" Japanese culture? Can the Moslem people only understand Islam? Clearly, such ethnic or religious identification can be abused and usurped through political manipulation. And

what about the symbolic violence of giving voice to the hitherto voiceless, inevitably altering and eliminating the voiceless-ness as if a necessary compensatory side-effect to the decision-making of "speaking out"?

The question of "understanding" can no longer be regarded as a simple epistemological problem. As far as "understanding" implies cultural intervention in "the other," how can it be distinguished from transgression? If minorities have to obey canonical criteria and accept global standardization, aren't they already tamed by the dominant logic of the majority? To what extent can and should obstacles to transience and resistances against global ecumenics be defended and encouraged in cross-cultural confrontations?

Crossings of borders (between genders, cultures, administrations, faiths, religions and even scholarly disciplines) touch on the experience of liminality. By focusing on this *topos* of transition and alterity, this interdisciplinary symposium hopes to propose a new framework for ethics in cross-cultural communication.

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