implicated while also allowing for a recognition of difference and points of resistance. The position from which anthropology may now speak is one of deliberate eccentricity. The point is that the degree of centrality to our own belief system held by various propositions about the world is not a correlate to different degrees of reality (Rorty 1991a: 52). By its double vision, and through its speaking from the perceived periphery rather than the self-declared centre of reason, anthropology challenges received wisdom. Thus, it enables us to make the world new rather than to get it right (cf. Rorty 1991a: 44).

This evidently has to be demonstrated in practice. Ethnography and detailed empirical studies from all over the globe must be produced to that effect. Along with that, the epistemological assumptions of anthropology must be questioned and clarified. As noted by Pierre Bourdieu, progress of knowledge in the social sciences implies progress in our knowledge of the conditions of knowledge (Bourdieu 1990: 1). This book is addressed to an elucidation of some of the basic conditions for anthropological knowledge by the end of the twentieth century, at a time of scholarly uncertainty in the wake of a self-declared postmodernism that made of the world a paradox of unification and fragmentation — inaccessible for science, if ready for narration.

Given this paradox, the passage to anthropology is not easily made by way of a traditional map. Regionalism, grand theory and dogma that once provided fixed coordinates for orientation in the scholarly space are being replaced by moving frames of reference. This calls for an itinerary rather than a map. The latter may show you where you are, while the former tells you where you are going. The itinerary indicates direction and places of reverence, and works on the experience of movement in space. This explains the organization of my book. The direction is towards anthropology as a vital theoretical project; the tour passes what I consider to be points of contemplative relevance as indicated by the chapter headings. It is neither a straight line of argument nor a fixed structure of certainties. It is a tour which — like a pilgrimage — counts by the effort as much as by the goal. At the end of the tour lies nothing but a rather simple point about the intrinsic value of the theoretical project of anthropology — apart from the knowledge that the passage has been made. A renewed confidence in the anthropological project may hopefully ensue upon return.

Chapter 1

The ethnographic present
On starting in time

In the context of modern world history the present tends to evade our gaze and to defy our language. 'The present' refers not only to the contemporary but also to the peculiar: what is not yet clear because of its uniqueness and interpretative ambiguity. Our present seems to be substantially different from the present that our predecessors confronted, just a short time ago (Fox 1991b: 1). Decentred, fragmented and compressed are some of the words in current use, signalling the nature of the difference. With the sense of substantial change goes an enlarged mental problem of assessing the present; as Marilyn Strathern has recently argued, it is always the present rather than the future that is the momentous unknown (Strathern 1992: 178). It is only the future that can tell us how to evaluate the present. And with the decentredness of the world, it seems more doubtful than ever that we shall be able to make a uniform future evaluation. The present is endlessly open for interpretation.

Nevertheless, the present is where we start from. Touring means setting out from a particular point in time and space. Trajectories may be made in all directions, but the anthropological traveller literally moves in the present and becomes part and parcel of the global unrest. The old treading stones have to be turned as a matter of course. Occasionally, this will give one a sense of losing one's footing, but the sense of direction is not necessarily threatened.

As implied by the prologue, recent epistemological turmoils in anthropology have been related to no less dramatic changes in the world order. Attempts have been made at recapturing the discipline before it disappears altogether (e.g. Fox 1991a). There has been a certain sense of panic resulting from the disappearance
of the traditional object, and what seems to be the last burial of positivist virtue. In the context of modern world history, englobe-
ment seems complete: the ‘others’ have become sadly like ‘us’. What is forgotten by the mourners is the fact that modernity
was everywhere indigenized (Sahlins 1992). The present cultural
projects of the peoples that earlier were deemed without history
are not chance inventions of tradition but full-scale declarations
of autonomy and authenticity. Anthropology must seek to contex-
tualize this declaration from a theoretical standpoint, not just a
sentimental one.

In a sense, there is no anthropology to recapture because it
was never at the point of vanishing; not more than the world
itself, that is. There has been a certain degree of epistemological
Angst, and the death of the discipline has been announced often
enough, but the fundamental continuity between anthropology
and the world remains as real as ever. The changes experienced
are, indeed, connected. The world changes and so must anthro-
poogy. Whether we like it or not, anthropology is one of the
declarations made by the self-announcing species of anthropos.

The Angst expressed over the past decade or more bears wit-
ness to a temporary theoretical shortcoming of anthropology
related to its imminent death. The ‘obituary mode’ is related
to the somewhat painful fact that anthropological knowledge all
too often has been used to supply us with parables for talking
about ourselves, rather than to explore historical alternatives for
the vast numbers of ‘other’ who live under critical conditions,
be it due to poverty, famine, civil war, flight, torture, racism or
totalitarianism. Thus, the mode is implicated by the theoretical
legacy of anthropology, constructed on an idea of other societies
as coherent wholes and thereby relegating chaos and disorder to
the non-social, or at best to a temporary setback (cf. Davis 1992b).
As I have argued elsewhere, this is no longer tenable (Hastrup
1993b). Theory has to catch up with the often distressful fact that
the world is chaotic, rather than mechanical. The Angst must be
faced, not evaded by means of disciplinary suicide.

The parables on ourselves were nourished by the eternal
mimetic process taking place between ourselves and others, a
process which for long – quite wrongly – was seen as a western
privilege (Taussig 1993). To mime is to play the other; the
western world and, with it, anthropology has held this in apparent
monopoly. We made the move that took us bodily into alterity;

as fieldworkers we became part of the space we studied, and to
which we attributed a dreamlike order. The dream has vanished.
The manifest disorder in the world and the discovery of the
others’ capacity to mime us have made it clear that, while differ-
ence remains, the world is one. To explore the epistemological
foundation of anthropology at this stage, therefore, serves a dif-
ferent purpose than just providing a lifeboat for a sinking disci-
pline. It serves to remind it about its own constructive ambiguity:
in addition to its being a field of knowledge, a disciplinary field,
it is also a field of action, a force field (Schepers-Hughes 1992:
24–25). This book is an attempt to provide an epistemological
basis for a practical integration of these two fields, being the
arenas for objectivity and solidarity respectively. The present
western disorientation seems to be a privileged starting point for
anthropology to once again catch up with its time.

THE HORIZON OF ANTHROPOLOGY

The horizon is as far as we can see from where we are. It is not
fixed; if we move in space the horizon shifts. What is within one’s
horizon is subject to revision and expansion. Scholarly anthro-
poogy developed from the Age of Discovery, and was founded
upon an exploration of unmapped cultural territories. In this vein,
anthropology has continued to contribute to the expansion of the
western horizon.

The identity of a person, and of a scholarly discipline, is also
firmly linked to the horizon within which we are capable of taking
a stand (Taylor 1989: 27). It is not a property but a space with
unfixed boundaries, perpetually subject to expansion or contra-
ction. It is a moral space which allows us to orient ourselves, and
thus to ‘become’ ourselves in the first place. The notion of a
moral space points to the fact that the space within which we
orient ourselves is not just a society or a language, but a space
within which our grasping the world in terms of values is insepara-
able from our way of living (Taylor 1989: 67).

This implies that the identity of the anthropological profession
is intimately linked to its practice and to its contribution to the
cultural and moral horizons by which our lives are bounded. For
some, the claim to a particular profession rather than just a
perspective may seem superfluous. To me this is a necessary
starting point for qualifying the practice as something other than
ordinary travelling and subsequent pondering about difference. Anthropology may not be a prototypical member of the category of scholarship, let alone of 'science', yet its import derives from its ability to discover and define reality just as much as linguistics and physics. Its potential stems from its power to question the givens of western culture rather than confirming them. As such, anthropology continues the Romantic reaction against Enlightenment reason (cf. Shweder 1984), and against the sanctification of the natural sciences (Rorty 1991b: 18). The discovery of other worlds is explicitly creative.

The point is not to dethrone natural science for the fun of it alone; its displacement from the centre of the category of sciences is principally a means of understanding the shortcomings of the view – stretching from physics and extending far into analytic philosophy – that scientific thinking essentially consists in clarification, or 'in patiently making explicit what has remained implicit' (Rorty 1991b: 12). Clarification does not make the trick as far as the human sciences are concerned. The interpretation, or the scientific explanation of matters cultural, is not an inherent quality of the object; it is the result of a project of linking and contextualizing defined by a specific purpose. The event of understanding is intertextual in the widest sense of this term. This event is mediated in words that have often belied the demands of the interpretative frame and presented the understanding as if given by the nature of the object. This can never be the case; clarification of objective properties is but one step in a larger process of radical interpretation.

Articulation, evidently, is not the target. All scholarship needs to be articulated to make sense. In spite of the delusive nature of language, proponents of silence are unconvincing (cf. Taylor 1989: 91ff., 98). Articulacy, however, is not a matter of finding words corresponding adequately to the reality beyond them in the hope of finding a final resting-place for thought (Rorty 1991b: 19). There is no such final resting-place, no ultimate, ahistorical reality, to which our vocabularies must be adequate. Clarification recedes to articulation, as a way of making sense. In anthropology, articulacy is a way of explicitly escaping the illusion of fit between words and lived experiences, by demonstrating the lack of fit between different reference schemes.

The mismatch between reference schemes, or cultures, as experienced in fieldwork is conceptually overcome by our shared human capacity of imagination. The range of imaginative power in anthropology is an integral part of its ability to contribute to a liberation of culture from its own obsolete vocabularies by its ability to weave new metaphors into the fabric of common beliefs. Metaphors are not parasites upon reality, they are extensions of it. As such they are forerunners of a new language, stretched to fit new experiences. In short, anthropology is one important source for acknowledging that cognition is not necessarily recognition, and that the acquisition of truth is not a matter of fitting data into a pre-established scheme (cf. Rorty 1991b: 13).

The prime virtue of anthropology lies in the fact that its space is as open-ended as the world to which it belongs. It cannot, therefore, make claims to a particular regime of truth in the Foucauldian sense – implying just another possible epistemic order. The open-endedness of anthropology is owed to its unflinching commitment to exploring different epistemologies, but this does not amount to a claim that all orders are equally possible or equally good. This is where the subjective standpoint is once again insurmountable; as pointed out by Taylor, the point of view from which we might constate that all orders are equally arbitrary, in particular that all moral views are equally so, is just not available to us humans. It is a form of self-delusion to think that we do not speak from a moral orientation which we take to be right.

(Taylor 1989: 99)

There is no way of speaking from nowhere in particular, as previously argued, not even for transculturated anthropologists.

So far anthropologists have spoken from an off-centred position within the category of sciences. If this has seemed to marginalise our contribution, I believe that the inherent eccentricity of anthropology vis-à-vis the dominant world-view is a source of extreme strength. This, of course, has still to be demonstrated in practice. Trajecting the present horizon of anthropology, as I do in this book, points to the future. In a sense I am trying to 'project back' from some future vantage point to an evaluation of the present. Evaluation is part of knowledge; people – and anthropologists among them – not only learn to think, they also learn to care. If it seems daring thus to stretch the present to its limits it is perfectly in keeping with the anthropological quest: the expansion of the horizon takes place in time as well as space.
Evaluating the present is to make claim to potentiality as well as actuality.

PRACTISING ETHNOGRAPHY

Stressing the need to take off in the present implies an emphasis upon anthropology as practice, that is, a mode of doing and creating. The anthropological practice bifurcates into a field practice and a discursive practice, implicated also in the performative paradox identified above.

The anthropological discourse has been marked by an extensive use of what is known as the ‘ethnographic present’. It implies the use of the present tense as the dominant mode of representing the others. The use of tense has been seriously criticized as reflecting a particular relationship of observation and distancing to the object (Fabian 1983: 86). It has been described as a vague and essentially atemporal moment (Stocking 1983: 86), reflecting the ahistoric or synchronic pretense of anthropology (Crapanzano 1986: 51).

The ethnographic present is, evidently, a literary device, and as such it needs to be questioned along with other conventions of representation in anthropology. However, it is not solely an accidental temporal mode loosely linked to the synchronic nature of fieldwork (Marcus and Fischer 1986: 96). Nor is it in any way a simple matter of synchronizing our descriptions. Rather it covers a variety of textual *mise-en-scènes* (Davis 1992a). The ethnographic present is a corollary of the peculiar nature of the anthropological practice as identified in the performative paradox. It is a necessary construction of time, because only the present tense preserves the reality of *anthropological* knowledge. I argue this in full recognition of the critique raised against the earlier ahistoric mode of anthropology. The choice of tense was right but it rested on false assumptions. My contention is that we are now in a position to reassess our assumptions and to reinvent the ethnographic present without previous connotations.

Fieldwork is diacritical in the anthropological practice. While it lasts, it is a radical experience of estrangement and relativism. Afterwards, it becomes memory and the backbone of objectivism. By way of opening this well-known theme I shall present a fragment of my own memories from the field.

Looking back upon my fieldwork in Iceland in 1982–1983 I recall that I suffered a lot. Although it took place within the boundaries of the self-declared western civilization, my sufferings were of a general kind. In addition to the monotonous diet, the cold, the blizzards, and the inescapable nature to which I was constantly exposed, I had the not uncommon problems of loneliness, of sexual assaults, loss of identity and offensive enemy spirits. In spite of all this, one of my greatest shocks in the field was to be reminded of my own world. Towards the end of my first year-long stay in Iceland, when I lived and worked in a fishing village in pitch-dark and ice-cold winter, and where I had for some time felt completely cut off from the rest of the world, I once received six letters addressed to Kirsten Hastrup. They were full of questions like: would I organize a conference?; what would I like to teach in the spring term?; would I do an Open University course?; and would it not be wonderful to get back? That really got me down, and I knew instantly that I would never ever go back to that world which had nothing to do with me. I was infuriated that people assumed that they knew who I was. They did not, obviously. I was Kristín a Gimli, worked as a fishwoman, smelled of fish, and shared my incredibly shabby house with three young and wild fishermen. That was who I wanted to be, I decided, and threw the letters into a heap of junk.

They remained there, but as readers will have guessed, I myself returned – at least partly – to the world I had left. In that world I write articles on the fishermen’s violence and the god-forsaken village. Experience has become memory, and the relics are embellished so as to pass for anthropology (cf. Bocn 1986). The anecdote thus serves the immediate purpose of situating fieldwork between autobiography and anthropology (cf. Hastrup 1992a).

It also illustrates the nature of the ethnographer’s presence in the field. At the time of my inverse culture shock I had in some sense ‘gone native’. Margaret Mead once warned us that although immersing oneself in local life is good, one should be careful not to drown; allegedly, one way of maintaining the delicate balance is to write and receive letters from one’s own world (Mead 1977: 7). In my case the letters pushed me even further down into the native world; I had no choice of degree of immersion. Even though we now recognize that ‘going native’ is to enter a world of one’s own creation (Wagner 1975: 9), there is still reason to stress the radical nature of the fieldwork experience – profoundly marking the entire anthropological discourse. Whether the indi-
individual anthropologist goes temporarily native or not, the fieldwork practice implies that the well-established opposition between subject and object dissolves in anthropology. The ethnographer is not only labelled by the others, she is also named.

As named, that is, as an identified subject in the alien discursive space, the ethnographer becomes part of her field. Her presence is the occasion and the locus of the drama that is the source of anthropological reflection (Dumont 1978: 12). There is no absolute perspective from where we can eliminate our own consciousness from our object (Rabinow 1977: 151). By her presence in the field, the ethnographer is actively engaged in the construction of the ethnographic reality or, one might say, of the ethnographic present.

This is where we can begin to see that the practice of fieldwork eliminates both subjectivism and objectivism and posits truth as an intersubjective creation. In this sense, fieldwork is almost like a possession, which by itself is nothing but the collapse of the subject–object relation (Fernandez 1986: 247). Although our results cannot be measured against the requirements of natural scientific verification, we have no choice: anthropology is radical interpretation and cannot, therefore, be wertfrei (cf. Taylor 1979: 71). It can be scholarship, of course, and of a kind that may have radical implications for the world. Before that, fieldwork has to be transformed into text. The practice of anthropology implies a writing of ethnography from a particular standpoint of knowing and interpreting—in time.

**WRITING CULTURES**

Culture is an invention. tied up with the invention of anthropology (Wagner 1975). Unlike earlier generations of anthropologists who thought of culture in essentialist terms, we now realize that it is a creation on our part, and one which may become increasingly poeticized—in fact and in text (cf. Rorty 1991a: 110). Whether construed in the singular, and denoting a philosophical counterpoint to nature, or in the plural, designating sociological entities, we can no longer claim culture to be an objective fact. Cultures materialize in contradistinction to each other; differences are exaggerated in the process. Anthropology has cemented the exaggeration and described the others as everything we were not. Conversely, the others have presented simulacra of themselves in order to fob off and satisfy our search to understand their specificity (Ardener 1989b: 183).

A primary conclusion is, then, that unlike a society which is an empirical entity, culture is an analytical implication. The cultural order is virtual; it is realized only as events of speech and action (Sahlins 1985: 153). Events are the empirical form of system, which is, therefore, under constant risk from practice. Ultimately, that is why we have to write cultures in order to perceive them as wholes.

The invention of culture in anthropological writing must (in some sense at least) reflect the ways in which cultures invent themselves if anthropology wants to be faithful to its own aims (Wagner 1975: 30). Not any piece of writing will do, if we want to call ourselves anthropologists and not just travel writers. We have to seriously investigate the lived space, which is the experiential counterpart to the implicational cultural space. I shall term this experiential space a 'world' (Hastrup 1987c). It will be understood that this is not solely an ideational space, but one that is made up of people and actions. Indeed, the old dichotomy between idealism and materialism makes no sense (Ardener 1982: 11). However, the main point here is that the implication of culture—to pose as an analytical object of anthropology—must have a lived counterpart in the world. It is this world that the ethnographers must enter if their writings shall be 'realistic.'

We shall return to realism later (in chapter 9); here I shall sum up about culture that it is sensed only by way of 'culture shock'—summing up in dramatic form the exposure to another culture. In anthropology this implies the ethnographer's deliberately subjecting herself to a world beyond her competence; we cannot write real cultures without experiences of other worlds. The road to anthropological knowledge goes via shared social experience (Hastrup and Hervik 1994). The degree of sharing is often astonishing, as another anecdote from my fieldwork will illustrate.

For some months I lived and worked on an Icelandic farm where I, to the best of my knowledge, practised participant observation. It implied a particular kind of presence that made me an object in the Icelanders' discourse; they wrote their culture all over me. In order to achieve a proper position in the farming world I had assumed the role of milkmaid and shepherdess. During my first stay, I had actually been partly responsible for the milking and tending of some 30 cows. It was gratifying to
achieve new basic skills in itself, but more importantly, my working position also greatly facilitated an actual shift of identity, theoretically implied by participant observation. As an anthropologist one cannot easily get a close relationship to thirty relatively stupid cows, but as milkmaid one is bound to take them seriously. One must surrender to the role in a very direct manner; there is no way of finding oneself between cows handling their udders and still pretending that one is there only for scholarship. For me, the work soon entailed differentiated relations to the cows, which I could no longer deal with as a category but had to deal with as named individuals. I collected their names, of course, for later analysis, but first of all I experienced how some cows were nice and friendly, while others were stupid, and some even hostile. One cow in particular always annoyed me, and once it occasioned a sprained thumb - an injury that is very inconvenient for a milkmaid. I really got to dislike the beast and I am sure it was a mutual feeling.

After a few months I left the farm to go elsewhere, but also to return six months later. On my return I immediately found my old place in the cowshed and went from cow to cow to recall their names. In front of my old enemy I sensed the well-known feeling of anger and murmured: ‘So there you still are, you silly old beast.’ Next morning, when the farmer and I went into the cowshed to do the morning milking, the beast was lying dead on the floor, for no apparent reason. I was deeply shocked, because I knew that in previous times such occurrences had brought witches to the stake.

The point of this tale is not only to show how the cow recognized me as ‘of the Icelandic world’ so full of magic and witchcraft, but that even I, the anthropologist disguised as a milkmaid, was prepared to take responsibility for the death of the cow. I had internalized an experiential space where time was another and where the usual patterns of causality were suspended. While undoubtedly in some sense a space of my own creation, the experience was real - and of the kind that makes ethnographers doubt self-evidences.

My own implicit allegation of witchcraft (as against myself) was not a question of belief, and far less of superstition. It was an expression of my experiencing a distinct reality of which I was temporarily part, and which once and for all taught me that we cannot separate materiality and meaning. They are simultaneities in the world in which we live, and as such they write themselves onto the ethnographer who temporarily shares the world of others. It is this simultaneity that makes actual presence in the other world a precondition for the writing of culture, and which transforms the inherent paradox of participant observation into a literary dilemma of ‘participant description’ (Geertz 1988: 83).

PRESENCE AND REPRESENTATION

Until recently, the ethnographer’s presence in the field was the sole stamp of authority needed in the anthropological monograph (cf. Clifford 1983b). Since Malinowski, fieldwork was a strategy of discovery by which the anthropologist could intervene in alien spaces and behave ‘like an ideal metering device’ (Arden 1985: 57). The invention of this strategy – of I-witnessing (Geertz 1988) – made a new genre of writing possible, the genre of realism. Within this genre ‘the author as fieldworker was always implicitly present; the author as author was always implicitly absent’ (Boon 1983: 138). Today, the questioning of the anthropologist’s authorial status marks the end of modernism.

Physical presence in the field is no longer the source of absolute authority. The kind of participation needed to identify events and write real cultures cannot be glossed as mere ‘being’ in the field. It implies a process of ‘becoming’. Becoming is a metaphor for a kind of participation that can never be complete and which is no immediate consequence of physical presence. It does not imply that the anthropologist gradually becomes identical with the others. I did not become an Icelandic shepherdess although I participated in sheep-farming and experienced the unreality of shepherdesses in misty mountains (cf. Hastrup ’87). The concept of becoming implies that one gives in to an alien reality and allows oneself to change in the process. One is not completely absorbed in the other world, but one is also no longer the same. The change often is so fundamental that it is difficult to see how the fieldworker has any identity with her former self. Fieldwork, therefore, escapes our ordinary historical categories. The space discovered has neither a firm future nor a distinct past, because intentions and memories are transformed as definitions, categories and meanings shift. Participant observation today implies an observation of participation itself (cf. Tedlock’91). It is not self-evident that what we participate in is the real life of the others.
Although part of the ethnologist's life-history and also representing a moment in the course of local history, the experience of the fieldwork as such is outside history (as a particular temporal mode). It is so strongly marked by liminality that the ordinary succession of events is suspended (cf. Turnbull 1990). Furthermore, insight is obtained by a degree of violence; the ethnographer must keep up a certain pressure in order to elicit information (Griaule 1957: 14; cf. also Clifford 1983a). Power differences inform the dialogue and distort history. They also create history, but it is a kind of history that is but a fleeting moment and cannot be spoken about in ordinary historical categories. Hence the ethnographic present. The tense reflects the reality of fieldwork.

The problem is that within realism as a genre, the ethnographic present was thought to represent the reality of the other society. For functionalists and consorts, the realist monograph represented what societies were: timeless, islandlike entities (Boon 1982: 14). However, the critique of realism as genre and of the assumptions behind earlier modes of representation should not make us lose sight of the reality of fieldwork and of 'realism' as quite a respectable epistemology. We must not continue the logical error of mistaking the one for the other, that is, of confounding genre and epistemology.

Fieldwork is outside history quite irrespective of the fact that all societies have histories of their own and are deeply involved in global history as well. The reality of fieldwork is a liminal phase for both subjects and objects, in which the distinction between them is dissolved; at alternating points in the discourse subject and object take on the complementary positions of namer and named (Parkin 1982: xxxii-xxxiv). History seems to be suspended for both parties. The present is what frames the encounter and lends it meaning. The frame is far from fixed, but somehow fieldwork is stuck within it.

The liminality of fieldwork is one reason why it has been likened to a rite de passage, and generally identified as the central ritual of the tribe of anthropologists (Stocking 1983: 70). Now, the meaning of ritual is not its inner essence, but its being part of a wider self-defining social space. Rituals often are among the more remarkable declarations of such spaces. Although the history of anthropological theory tends to belie this, ritual cannot be studied isolated as 'text'; it is a context-marker. So also for
local stories. That is far more convincingly done by those who live them. The hallmark of anthropology is to experience the force of detail in practical life and to recast it in a theoretical mode that transcends it. Life has to be recreated in a separate language in order to be comprehended.

CULTURAL TRANSLATION

We are led towards a reconsideration of cultural translation. This notion has been used as a metaphor for anthropology, especially within British anthropology since Evans-Pritchard. Although lip service has often been paid to the fact that it is not really like linguistic translation, it is only recently that a serious questioning of the metaphor has begun, notably by Ardener (1989b) and Asad (1986).

One example to which Asad draws attention is Godfrey Lienhardt’s seminal work on ‘Modes of Thought’ (1954), in which he writes:

The problem of describing to others how members of a remote tribe think then begins to appear largely as one of translation, of making the coherence primitive thought has in the languages it really lives in, as clear as possible in our own.

(Lienhardt 1954: 97)

Leach is even more direct when he says that the anthropological problem of coping with cultural difference essentially is one of translation; it may be difficult but a ‘tolerably satisfactory translation is always possible’ (Leach 1973: 772, quoted in Asad 1986: 142). Behind the idea of cultural translation lies a mode of thinking about anthropological representation as an attempt to reproduce one social space in the discourse of another as accurately as possible. As we have seen, this is an untenable epistemological assumption.

The problem is not merely that some categories can only be rendered by approximation and then only on a considerable, encyclopaedic (or ethnographic) background (Sperber 1985: 44). A much more important source for the unease about the metaphor of translation is the profound asymmetry between languages; the alleged translation takes place between languages that are unequal from the outset (Asad 1986). This is partly due to the lamented legacy of colonialism out of which anthropology grew, and the related power structure always inherent in the legitimization of language (Bourdieu 1991), partly to the nature of the anthropological discourse. To put it briefly, the discourse in which one can write about somebody for a specific audience is by definition a discourse of englobement. The linguistic inequality is aggravated by the implicit hierarchy between Western literate and oral forms of knowledge in Western culture (cf. Clifford 1988b: 339–341). Dissecting the notion of translation thus leads back to the point that anthropological knowledge is a symptom of our own society (Scholte 1980: 66–67). That is a political point worth repeating.

A theoretical point also worth making is that we cannot properly translate cultures into our own without destroying their specificity. Taken to the extreme, translation implies a transformation of the unknown into something known, and anthropology would clearly become absurd if this was taken literally:

What lies at the end of translation ... is a kind of entropy of the translated system — a total remapping of the other social space into entities of the translating one. At our destination the terrain would, however, be disappointingly familiar.

(Archer 1989b: 178)

Thus, at the end of the road of translation, anthropology would have to start all over again — by re-establishing difference.

Difference always mattered more than similarity in the writing of cultures. What goes onto the anthropological map is cultural difference. Any idea of translation from one cultural space to another is vastly complicated by the symbolic interpenetration of cultures by which difference is first established. ‘Culture’ is already an implication, and in spite of claims to accurate representation, ethnographic texts are inescapably allegorical. The difference is not translated, it is posited and transcended.

Difference is posited through the experience of fieldwork, from which we know that cultural understanding is about dis-equaling rather than equation (Archer 1989b: 183). After the initial experience of relativism, difference is transcended in writing and its implied objectivism. This process is not a mechanical process of translation but a highly complex process of understanding and re-enactment, in which the anthropologist herself plays a crucial part, and which is complicated by features of heteroglossia and mutedness.\)


Once we have realized that anthropology is not about replacing one discourse by another, or about representation or translation, we may return to a consideration of the anthropological practice as a creative process—of presenting ethnography. Even if the object of study must be historicized in all sorts of ways, the choice of tense is right; what would the point of anthropology be if its truth had already gone at the moment of writing.

THE PROPHETIC CONDITION

However, provisional in a larger historical perspective, the truth carried by the message of the anthropologist must be convincing. This is a problem she shares with Hermes, another trickster (Crapanzano 1986: 52). It is also a problem she shares with the prophet with whom I shall now introduce. Both timing and translation are put into perspective by the prophetic condition, as identified by Edwin Ardener (1989; cf. Hastrup 1989). The prophetic condition is a condition of both structures and individuals who find themselves between two worlds. The prophet gives voice to a new world but belongs to an old one. The voice is not always heard. The words seem incomprehensible beforehand; afterwards they are trivial. When the new world has materialized, the words of the prophet are indistinguishable from ordinary speech. The structural conditions for prophecy can be more or less favourable. A privileged condition obtains when a discontinuity is generally sensed, but when it is not conceivable in known categories.

The anthropologist is ‘like’ a prophet, structurally speaking. The two worlds mediated by the anthropologist are more often separated in space than in time, but in principle the anthropologist gives voice to a new world. The prophetic position of the anthropologist is further substantiated when we realize that prophets do not predict a future. Predictions are always part of current language and when they prove ‘correct’ it is because they are essentially repetitions. Predictions always fail when they are most needed, that is, when repetition does not occur. The prophet does not predict the future, he foretells it before it has been incorporated into the collective representations. He gives voice to and in that sense defines the world he has discovered. He expands on the present by telling it to its limits. In other words, the perception of a new world is closely related to an expansion of language. A new reality takes shape as it is conceptualized, in anthropology as well as in prophecy. The ‘other’ world is discovered and defined simultaneously; observation and theory are one.

There are, of course, realities and histories before and beyond anthropology. But through the dual nature of the anthropological practice, of experiencing and writing, a new world of betweenness is created. It is this betweenness that places the anthropologist in a prophetic position and forces her to speak in the ethnographic present. In spite of recent claims to multiple authorship, it is still the voice of the anthropologist that presents the other world in the text. Like the prophet, the anthropologist offers another language, another space, another time to reality. That is the emergent meaning of the anthropological practice.

I argue, then, that timing in anthropology—seen as an essentially prophetic discourse—involves the use of the ethnographic present. Its inevitability is linked to our ritual presence in the field, without which the context is meaningless as anthropology. The ethnographic present is a narrative construct that clearly does not represent a truth about the timelessness of the others. We know that they are as historical as anybody in all possible ways. But the betweenness implied in fieldwork, and the fact of the ethnographer’s sharing the time of the others, makes ethnography escape the ordinary historical categories.

The prophetic condition implies that the unspoken becomes spoken, and that language expands on both sides of the dialogue. Whereas translation presupposes two separate discourses, one of which is the object of the other, prophecy implies intersubjectivity or intertextuality affecting both worlds. To the extent that we are now ready to acknowledge that the ethnographer changes in the field, we should also admit that neither do the informants remain the same. Nor do they remain ‘other’. We have to abandon the use, not of the ethnographic present but of the term ‘informants’ that construes the others as (verbal) pathways to separate worlds. In the newly discovered world between us and them, the illusion of distance is broken.

In the prophetic condition of anthropology there is an impli- cational truth that is not outlived when the ethnographer leaves the field, and which should not, therefore, be rendered in the past tense. When this is realized, the ethnographic present may lead to many possible futures. As such, the ethnographic present is what potentiates anthropology.