The Uses of Complicity in the Changing Mise-en-Scène of Anthropological Fieldwork

Rapport: Report, talk. Reference, relationship; connexion, correspondence, conformity. A state in which mesmeric action can be exercised by one person on another.

Collaboration: United labour, co-operation; especially in literary, artistic, or scientific work.

Collaborate: To work in conjunction with another.

Complicity: The being an accomplice; partnership in an evil action. State of being complex or involved.

Complice: One associated in any affair with another, the latter being regarded as the principal.

In what is perhaps his most broadly influential essay, “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight,” Clifford Geertz opens with a tale of fieldwork in which the rapport that is so much sought after by anthropologists among the peoples they study is achieved through a circumstance of complicity. In 1958, Geertz and his wife moved to a remote Balinese village to take up, in the tradition of Bronislaw Malinowski, the sort of participant observation that has given distinction to the ethnographic method. Unfortunately, their initial efforts to fit in were met with marked inattention and studied indifference: “people seemed to look right through us with a gaze focused several yards behind us on some more actual stone or tree.” However, their status changed dramatically about ten days after their arrival, when they attended a cockfight that was raided by the police. Geertz and his wife ran from the invading police along with the rest of the village, and when they were finally discovered by a policeman and questioned about their presence, they were passionately defended by the village chief, who said they belonged in the village and did not know anything about any cockfight. From the next morning on, their situation in the village was completely different: they were no longer invisible, and they had indeed achieved the kind of relationship that
would allow them to do their work and eventually produce the account of a cultural artifact that follows this opening tale of fieldwork—an account that became a widely assimilated exemplar of a style of interpretive analysis in which deep meanings are derived from the close observation of a society’s most quotidian events. Geertz concludes his anecdote by saying,

Getting caught, or almost caught, in a vice raid is perhaps not a very generalizable recipe for achieving that mysterious necessity of anthropological field work, rapport, but for me it worked very well. It led to a sudden and unusually complete acceptance into a society extremely difficult for outsiders to penetrate. It gave me the kind of immediate, inside-view grasp of an aspect of “peasant mentality” that anthropologists not fortunate enough to flee headlong with their subjects from armed authorities normally do not get.4

In Geertz’s anecdote I am primarily interested in the ironic entanglement of complicity with rapport that he draws. Indeed, for anthropologists trained from the 1950s through the 1980s, rapport has been the powerful shorthand concept used to stand for the threshold level of relations with fieldwork subjects that is necessary for those subjects to act effectively as informants for anthropologists—who, once that rapport is established, are then able to pursue their scientific, “outsider” inquiries on the “inside.”

The range of definitions given in the OED for the word rapport—from “talk” to “relationship” to “conformity” to the unusual meaning of “a state in which mesmeric action can be exercised by one person on another”—apty conveys the mix of senses of this key figure within the ideology of anthropological practice. Of course, behind this figure are the immensely complex stories, debates, views, and critiques that surround the relationships that anthropological fieldwork imposes. Since the 1960s, this probing of fieldwork relationships has moved from informal, ethos-building professional talk—a regulative ideal—to a more formal articulation found in both reflections on fieldwork and essays on anthropology’s distinctive method, discussions in which Geertz himself has been a seminal, though ambivalent, voice.5

Until recently, much of this discussion has assumed the essential desirability and achievability of rapport—it remains the favored condensed view and disciplinary emblem of the ideal condition of fieldwork—even while the path to rapport seems always to have been fraught with difficulties, uncertainties, happenstance, ethical ambiguity, fear, and self-doubt. However, there are now signs of the displacement of this foundational commonplace of fieldwork, given the changing mise-en-scène in which anthropological research is now frequently being constituted. It is probably a healthy sign that no replacement figure, as such, is emerging to take rapport’s place. Rather, a deep reassessment of the nature of fieldwork is beginning to occur as a result of defining the different conditions in which it must be designed and conceptualized.

Purely as a means of lending perspective to and representing the set of changes that are affecting anthropological practice and the way that it is thought
about, I have chosen in this essay to emphasize the concept of complicity. Indeed, many fieldwork stories of achieving rapport are in some way entangled with acts of complicity, as in Geertz’s epochal anecdote. But while complicity has a certain kinship of meaning with rapport, it is also its “evil twin,” so to speak. (In this regard, I appreciate the OED’s definitions of complicity as including both the “state of being complex or involved” and “partnership in an evil action.”) In no way am I promoting complicity as a candidate for a new shorthand or commonplace of disciplinary practice in our changed circumstances—its “dark” connotations certainly don’t lend it to that use. Rather, a focus on the term will serve as a device for tracing a certain critique, or at least complexation, of the valorized understanding of fieldwork relationships from within the reigning figure of rapport to an alternative conception of fieldwork relationships in which the figure of rapport has lost much of its power as a regulative ideal.

In the following section, then, I want to explore the ways in which Geertz dealt with the issue of complicity within rapport, since his representations of fieldwork represent for me the most subtle understandings of the traditional ideology of fieldwork practice at its apogee. Following that, I want to address two directions that critiques of ethnographic authority and rhetoric took in the 1980s, producing an unprecedentedly reflexive and critical perspective on fieldwork relations (a perspective that Geertz unquestionably helped to inspire and from which he interestingly has distanced himself).6

One of these directions displaces rapport with an ideal of collaboration that both preserves the traditional, enclosed mise-en-scène of fieldwork and avoids paying explicit attention to the issue of complicity that Geertz himself saw as so entangled with the very achievement of rapport. The other direction, aptly expressed in Renato Rosaldo’s notion of “imperialist nostalgia,”7 directly confronts complicity in fieldwork relationships within the broader historical context of colonialism in which the traditional mise-en-scène of ethnography has always been situated; but it fails to go beyond the ethical implications of that context to consider the cognitive ones.

Finally, I want to offer a conception of complicity that is largely free of the primary connotations of rapport. In so doing, I want to move beyond the predominant and troublesome ethical implications associated with complicity in past views of anthropological practice to an understanding of the fieldwork relationship that entails a substantially different vision of the contemporary mise-en-scène of anthropological research. Complicity here retains its ethical issues, but it does so in a way that forces a rethinking of the space and positioning of the anthropologist-informant relationship that is at the heart of fieldwork as it has been commonly conceived.

The larger stake of the discussion that I want to develop is indeed the current level of self-conscious awareness and response of anthropologists to the changing circumstances in which they now work—what I have referred to earlier as the

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mise-en-scène of fieldwork. Of course there have recently been many theoretical and direct conceptual discussions of these changing circumstances—the talk of transcultural processes, global-local relations, and deterritorialized cultures—but it is not clear what, if anything, these discussions have meant for the deeply ingrained and reassuring ideologies of fieldwork practice. Until these macro-changes are understood at the heart of anthropology's distinctive method, in terms of the commonplaces and powerful figures by which anthropologists have conceived fieldwork as an ideology of professional culture, it is quite likely that the traditional conception in use of the mise-en-scène and the central relationship of anthropologist to informant will remain immune from the more radical implications of the new theoretical visions and discussions of anthropology's changing objects of study. A consideration of these changes within anthropology's sacred domain, so to speak, is precisely what I intend to initiate by tracing complicity as at first an integral but underplayed dimension of rapport that has eventually become an independent means of understanding how certain deep assumptions and commonplaces about fieldwork might finally be modified in line with otherwise clear perceptions among anthropologists about how their objects and contexts of study are changing.

**Geertz and Complicity**

*But what is, to me anyway, most interesting about . . . these attempts to produce highly "author-saturated," supersaturated even, anthropological texts in which the self the text creates and the self that creates the text are represented as being very near to identical, is the strong note of disquiet that suffuses them. There is very little confidence here and a fair amount of outright malaise. The imagery is not of scientific hope, compensating inner weakness, à la Malinowski, or of bear-hug intimacy dispelling self-rejection, à la Read, neither of which is very much believed in. It is of estrangement, hypocrisy, helplessness, domination, disillusion. Being There is not just practically difficult. There is something disruptive about it altogether.*

As we have seen in the cockfight anecdote, for Geertz a certain *kind* of complicity generates rapport. In a manner characteristic of his signature style as a writer and thinker, in this passage Geertz seems to make light of a figure or commonplace of his discipline—rapport—while remaining passionately committed to his version of it—a version that actually strengthens the figure in the shadow of his playful, trenchant critique of it. He may disdain his discipline's too-easily assimilated shoptalk—about, for example, the figure of rapport—but finally he improves upon that talk and, in a committed way, preserves the traditional sense of the craft that the figure of rapport stands for. In "Deep Play," the ethnographer's powerful and exemplary analytic magic that follows the tale of complicity breaking into rapport is a testament to this.

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In the cockfight anecdote, complicity makes the outsider the desired anthropological insider. It is a circumstantial, fortuitous complicity that, by precipitating a momentary bond of solidarity, gains Geertz admission to the inside of Balinese relations (the means to ethnographic authority) and converts the Balinese village into a proper mise-en-scène of fieldwork—a physically and symbolically enclosed world, a culture for the ethnographer to live within and figure out. Very pragmatically, Geertz realizes that he can benefit from this complicity only by presenting himself as a naif, a person subject to events and looked out for by others (and this vulnerability of finding himself on the side of the village against the state and its agents, rather than representing himself as someone officially there through the auspices of the state, suggests both a shrewd and an ambiguous innocence about the historic era in which anthropological fieldwork was then being done).  

So complicity in this particular famous tale of fieldwork is rather neat and simple; it is an uncomplicated complicity that “breaks the ice” and provides the anthropologist the coveted fictional acceptance that will allow him to create the counter-“mesmerism” of rapport whereby he is no longer invisible, as before, but will be indulged as a person. But in a lesser-known paper on fieldwork, Geertz tells another more complex, yet complementary, story from the field in which he considers how complicity, internal to the development of relations with informants once he has gotten “inside,” is deeply entangled with the motivated fiction of sustaining rapport itself.  

This paper tells how a kind of complicity is necessary for sustaining the working relationships of fieldwork, without which its very mise-en-scène—let alone rapport—would not be possible in the anthropologist’s imaginary. This paper, “Thinking as a Moral Act: Ethical Dimensions of Anthropological Fieldwork in the New States,” reveals Geertz’s astute foresight of the possible development of a hyperreflexivity upon the conditions of anthropological knowledge—a subject that, after a complicated treatment in this paper, he turns away from in favor of accepting the fictions of fieldwork relations so that ethnographic interpretation and the historic anthropological project to which he is committed can continue (that is, the project of U.S. cultural anthropology in the line of, for example, Johann Herder, Franz Boas, Margaret Mead, and Ruth Benedict, among many others).

In “Thinking as a Moral Act,” Geertz describes a complicity of mutual interest between anthropologist and informant, subtly but clearly understood by each, that makes rapport possible—indeed that constitutes, even constructs, it. Geertz calls this key rapport-defining act of complicity an “anthropological irony” of fictions that each side accepts:

One is placed, in this sort of work, among necessitous men hoping for radical improvements in their conditions of life that do not seem exactly imminent; moreover, one is a type benefactor of just the sort of improvements they are looking for, also obliged to ask them for charity—and what is almost worse, having them give it. This ought to be a humbling, thus elevating, experience; but most often it is simply a disorienting one. All the familiar

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rationalizations having to do with science, progress, philanthropy, enlightenment, and selfless purity of dedication ring false, and one is left, ethically disarmed, to grapple with a human relationship which must be justified over and over again in the most immediate of terms.\textsuperscript{12}

What I am pointing to . . . is an enormous pressure on both the investigator and his subjects to regard these goals as near when they are in fact far, assured when they are merely wished for, and achieved when they are at best approximated. This pressure springs from the inherent moral asymmetry of the fieldwork situation.\textsuperscript{13}

To recognize the moral tension, the ethical ambiguity, implicit in the encounter of anthropologist and informant, and to still be able to dissipate it through one's actions and one's attitudes, is what encounter demands of both parties if it is to be authentic, if it is to actually happen. And to discover that is to discover also something very complicated and not altogether clear about the nature of sincerity and insincerity, genuineness and hypocrisy, honesty and self-deception.\textsuperscript{14}

Here again, as in the cockfight anecdote, the broader context of implication—that of colonialism and neocolonialism—that has so exercised the subsequent criticism of ethnography is submerged in Geertz's account, implied but not explicitly noted. The anthropology of the 1950s and 1960s was part of the great mission of development in the new states—in the midst of which Geertz was a very American as well as an anthropological writer, accepting this mission with a certain resignation that did not particularly define a politics of fieldwork. That politics instead emerged in terms of the always slightly absurd but very human predicaments of a well-meaning outsider thrust among people with very different life chances. According to the presumptions of the development mission, themselves based on Western notions of liberal decency, the outsider was in some sense the model of a desired future.\textsuperscript{15}

In Geertz's writings on his fieldwork of the 1960s and 1970s, we see first a virtual outline and summary of the major moves of later critique—built on the reflexive study of the conditions of anthropological knowledge not only in terms of its traditional mise-en-scène of fieldwork but also in terms of the broader historic contexts that Geertz tended to elide—and then a hesitation and a pulling back for the sake of sustaining a distanced practice of interpretation. Finally, as Geertz argues in his paper, “Thinking as a Moral Act,”

I don't know much about what goes on in laboratories; but in anthropological fieldwork, detachment is neither a natural gift nor a manufactured talent. It is a partial achievement laboriously earned and precariously maintained. What little disinterestedness one manages to attain comes not from failing to have emotions or neglecting to perceive them in others, nor yet from sealing oneself into a moral vacuum. It comes from a personal subjection to a vocational ethic . . . to combine two fundamental orientations toward reality—the engaged and the analytic—into a single attitude. It is this attitude, not moral blankness, which we call detachment or disinterestedness. And whatever small degree of it one manages to attain comes not by adopting an I-am-a-camera ideology or by enrolling oneself in layers of methodological armor, but simply by trying to do, in such an equivocal situation, the scientific work one has come to do.\textsuperscript{16}
Indeed, the Balinese cockfight essay itself enacts Geertz’s position on critical self-knowledge in anthropological practice. Once the incident described in the opening reflexive fieldwork anecdote has authoritatively secured the standard and idealized condition of rapport, or “mesmeric” possibility, the work of interpretation proceeds by the participant who is still a detached observer, famously able to read Balinese culture “like a text.” Geertz’s shrewd perception of the complicit heart of the otherwise soporific, too-easy professional invocation of rapport, followed by his pulling back from further reflexive examination and its implications, probably has disturbed his critics more than if he had not bothered to make this move into reflexivity at all.

The fact that he did and that he then pulled back from looking too closely at the conditions of the production of anthropological knowledge—a topic that he brilliantly introduced at a time of maximum positivist hopes and confidence in the social sciences—is not a sign of the ambivalence or hesitation that are otherwise so much a part of Geertz’s expository style of delivering insight. Rather it is a sign of his commitment to the frame of reference in which anthropology could be done: the frame that the figure of rapport guaranteed and that Geertz played with, could see the critique of, but would not go beyond for the sake of a historic anthropological project that he had done so much to renew in the 1960s and 1970s and that defined for him a “vocational ethic.” His concern—expressed in the passage with which this section opens and which first appeared in his 1988 book Works and Lives as a sideways commentary on that decade’s seminal critique of anthropological knowledge—was over the malaise that an unfettered reflexivity, following his own opening, might lead to. And has it?

The Collaborative Ideal

This possibility suggests an alternate textual strategy, a utopia of plural authorship that accords to collaborators not merely the status of independent enunciators but that of writers. As a form of authority it must still be considered utopian for two reasons. First, the few recent experiments with multiple-author works appear to require, as an instigating force, the research interest of the ethnographer who in the end assumes an executive, editorial position. The authoritative stance of “giving voice” to the other is not fully transcended. Second, the very idea of plural authorship challenges a deep Western identification of any text’s order with the intention of a single author. . . . Nonetheless, there are signs of movement in this domain. Anthropologists will increasingly have to share their texts, and sometimes their title pages, with those indigenous collaborators, for the term informants is no longer adequate, if it ever was.17

One strong direction of the critique of anthropological rhetoric, representation, and authority that occurred during the 1980s reconceived the figure of rapport in terms of collaboration. Associated with the writing of James Clifford

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and loosely derived from Mikhail Bakhtin’s notions of polyphony and dialogism as an alternative to the monologic authority of modes of voicing in the novel, the vision of a collaborative relationship between anthropologist and informant as authors of ethnography in the field has provided a strong reimagining of the regulative ideal of rapport in the ideology of anthropological practice. As presented by Clifford in a scholarly style of historical literary criticism, the collaborative ideal is less a methodological prescription or figure or fieldwork in a changing mise-en-scène than a rereading, an excavation, of certain overlooked dimensions of past ethnography. Its power, then, is in its suggestiveness of a more pleasing, post-1960s practice of thoroughly participatory fieldwork—and it is developed in a way that suggests that anthropologists need only consciously activate what was always there, an obscured dimension of classic fieldwork that was previously concealed by the monologic authority of the conventions of ethnographic writing.

Collaboration (“co-operation” in dialogue) thus replaces rapport (“relationship” or “connexion,” with its connotation of a means or instrumentality for fulfilling the ends primarily of one of the partners—the initiating one—of the relationship). Theoretically, collaboration creates a figure for a much more complex understanding of fieldwork, but in Clifford’s writing, which looks back at the ethnographic tradition through its classics and classics-in-the-making, this replacement figure is also very much forged in the traditional mise-en-scène of fieldwork—and in fact reinforces that traditional setting, giving it a needed new face, so to speak. The scene of fieldwork and the object of study are still essentially coterminous, together establishing a culture situated in place and to be learned about by one’s presence inside it in sustained interaction. The collaborative ideal entails the notions that knowledge creation in fieldwork always involves negotiating a boundary between cultures and that the result is never reducible to a form of knowledge that can be packaged in the monologic voice of the ethnographer alone. But still, the polyphony implied in the idea of collaboration preserves the idea of the representation of a bounded culture, however nonreductive, as the object of study and reinforces the same habits of work that rapport valorized. The independent voices in collaboration still emerge within a distinctly other form of life. Perhaps because of the way this ideal was developed in the critique of anthropology—by excavating from within the tradition of ethnography—it inherited the limits of the mise-en-scène that had preceded it.

Of course, neither collaboration nor the idea of dialogism on which it is based necessarily implies the harmony of “united labour” in a scientific, literary, or artistic endeavor, as the OED definition suggests, and Clifford does not develop the idea with this connotation. The positive OED sense remains a potentiality, but more often than not, collaboration is conflicted, based on misrecognitions, coercions, and precisely the sort of ironies/complicities that Geertz cataloged so well in his writing on fieldwork. Clifford differs from Geertz only in finally not being
personally tied to the scientific vocation of anthropology; thus, he can indulge a reflexivity that transforms the commonplace ideal of the fieldwork relation. Indeed, to recognize and legitimate as partners one's subjects of study and to generate only polyphonic texts would indeed make something radically different of ethnography; but it wouldn't significantly change the traditional frame of study.

Collaboration does evoke the reflexive space and suggests new conventions for the normalized discussion of the complexities, ambiguities, and nuances of the anthropologist-subject relationship central to fieldwork. Yet Clifford's articulation of the ambiguities of this relationship still remains rather mute as to the different senses of complicity that surround, motivate, and make this relationship possible. In particular, the broader colonial context as it operates in collaboration, while a part of Clifford's discussion, is not strongly developed.18

In relation to the particular sense of complicity that I want to develop below, which corresponds to a break with the traditional mise-en-scène of fieldwork, Clifford's discussion of collaboration can even be seen as evasive. It goes somewhat further than Geertz's in recognizing how the broader context of the anthropological project is registered in fieldwork, but it recognizes this context only in terms of the long-standing question of anthropology's relationship to colonialism. What is missing in the evocation of the ideal of collaboration is the much more complicated and contemporary sense of the broader context of anthropology operating in a so-called postmodern world of discontinuous cultural formations and multiple sites of cultural production. This context is certainly shaped in part by a history of colonialism, but it cannot be fully represented by that venerable bête noire, which has long served as the broader context in commonplace professional ideology, ambivalently cradling the traditional mise-en-scène of fieldwork.19

In the imagining of collaboration as fieldwork, then, complicity has not been a very important component, either in its ethical sense or in its cognitive potential for reconfiguring the fieldwork scene itself. But by fully opening a reflexive space that went beyond Geertz's own self-limited explorations of the regulative idea of rapport, the figure of collaboration created the necessary ground for going further. The explicit dimension of complicity remained to be powerfully articulated—and again, with regard to colonialism as the broader context—as part of the 1980s critique of anthropology by Renato Rosaldo, perhaps the spoiler of all of fieldwork's other fictions.

**Imperialist Nostalgia and Complicity**

*Processes of drastic change often are the enabling condition of ethnographic field research, and herein resides the complicity of missionary, constabulary, officer, and ethnographer. Just as Jones received visits from American constabulary officers during his field research, Michelle Rosaldo and I often used the missionary airplane for*

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Moving in another direction from the possibilities foreseen by Geertz, Renato Rosaldo takes the critique of the traditional mise-en-scène to its limit and finally makes explicit the broader context of anthropology in the scene of fieldwork. This is where complicity potentially has its greatest power as a figure. Rosaldo’s work has developed very much within the specific compass of interpretive anthropology that Geertz established in the 1960s and 1970s. As such, his essay “Imperialist Nostalgia” constitutes an appropriate expression of the evolution of Geertz’s thinking on fieldwork, now in its most politicized form. Among the critiques of the 1980s, this essay is the most recognizable successor to Geertz’s own writing.

The trenchant insight of this essay—indeed, another examplar of anthropological irony, as Geertz called complicity in fieldwork—is that the key ideological sentiment that has allowed anthropologists to distance themselves from other foreign agents in the field is precisely the sentiment that both denies and constructs their own agency in that very same transformative process. As Rosaldo says, “My concern resides with a particular kind of nostalgia, often found under imperialism, where people mourn the passing of what they themselves have transformed. . . . When the so-called civilizing process destabilizes forms of life, the agents of change experience transformations of other cultures as if they were personal losses.” Here, Rosaldo captures and indicts the characteristic rhetoric of ethics that pervades ethnography, at the same time pinpointing the primary relation of complicity in fieldwork—not with the informant or the people, but with the agents of change. This is the politicizing complicity from which Geertz backed off, and about which the alternative view of collaboration was not blunt enough.

This politicization at the limits of the figure of rapport is achieved by placing a primary emphasis on what was the play of complicity in Geertz. Rather than simply being the ironic means to a rapport that cements the working bond between fieldworker and informant, complicity becomes the defining element of the relationship between the anthropologist and the broader colonial context. In so doing, the problem of the broader outside context—again, thought of as colonialism—is finally brought squarely to the inside of the fieldwork relation, something that the collaborative ideal achieved only intermittently or indirectly.

So where has Rosaldo’s argument about “imperialist nostalgia” brought us in our tracing of the entanglements of complicity with the powerful regulative ideal of rapport? To the verge of talking primarily about complicity rather than rapport as constructing the primary fieldwork relation, and as such, to the brink of re-conceiving the stubbonly held mise-en-scène of fieldwork to better accommodate
different kind of ethnographic project that is now emerging and being professionally normalized in anthropology.

In Geertz’s writing, rapport requires that the anthropologist be complicit with the inside of a community or group of subjects. While not effacing the “insideness” essential to the fieldwork mise-en-scène, Rosaldo understands every apparent inside move the fieldworker makes as primarily complicit with the broader external context of colonialism. But, like Geertz’s earlier politically muted critique of fieldwork and Clifford’s contemporaneous critique of monologic authority in anthropological practice, Rosaldo’s essay is still located within rapport and its mise-en-scène, though at its outer limit. As such, the recognition of the sort of complicity that brings the outside into the scene of fieldwork with the very arrival of the anthropologist—who can no longer protect herself with the nostalgia that preserves her difference from other agents of change—remains for Rosaldo a moral lesson, one for which there is little further response from within the traditional ideology of rapport. For Rosaldo, anthropology of the old sort either is over, is paralized by moralizing insight, or continues to be practiced as a tragic occupation, done in the full awareness of the pitfalls of its powerful rhetorics of self-justification.

With Rosaldo, then, we come to an impasse. The kind of sustained reflexivity that Geertz feared, turned away from, and has more lately confirmed for himself as leading to malaise has now been taken to its limit within the traditional project of anthropology, revealing the implication of complicity that has always shadowed the positive figure of rapport. But is this really the end?

Complicity and the Multisited Spaces of Contemporary Ethnography

There exists a very strong, but one-sided and thus untrustworthy idea that in order to better understand a foreign culture, one must enter into it, forgetting one’s own, and view the world through the eyes of this foreign culture. . . . of course, the possibility of seeing the world through its eyes is a necessary part of the process of understanding it; but if this were the only aspect it would merely be duplication and would not entail anything enriching. Creative understanding does not renounce itself, its own place and time, its own culture; and it forgets nothing. In order to understand, it is immensely important for the person who understands to be located outside the object of his or her creative understanding—in time, in space, in culture. In the realm of culture, outsidedness is a most powerful factor in understanding. We raise new questions for a foreign culture, ones that it did not raise for itself; we seek answers to our own questions in it; and the foreign culture responds to us by revealing to us its new aspects and new semantic depths.?

The transformation of complicity that I want to trace, from its place in the shadows of the more positive and less ethically ambiguous notion of rapport

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to its emergence as a primary figure in the ideology of fieldwork, is occasioned by
the changing conditions of fieldwork itself and of its objects of study. These chang-
ing conditions are effectively stimulating the traditional mise-en-scène of field-
work to be turned inside out within the professional ideology, and it is the figure
of complicity that focuses this change.

Discontinuity in cultural formations—their multiple and heterogeneous sites
of production—has begun to force changes in the assumptions and notions that
have constructed the traditional mise-en-scène of fieldwork. Anthropologists, of
course, continue to work intensively and locally with particular subjects—the sub-
stance of ethnographic analysis requires this—but they no longer do so with the
sense that the cultural object of study is fully accessible within a particular site, or
without the sense that a site of fieldwork anywhere is integrally and intimately
tied to sites of possible fieldwork elsewhere. The intellectual environment sur-
rounding contemporary ethnographic study makes it seem incomplete and even
trivial if it does not encompass within its own research design a full mapping of a
cultural formation, the contours of which cannot be presumed but are themselves
a key discovery of ethnographic inquiry. The sense of the object of study being
“here and there” has begun to wreak productive havoc on the “being there” of
classic ethnographic authority.23

However complicity was implicated in the achievement of rapport in the criti-
cal versions of Geertz, Clifford, and Rosaldo, all three sustain the sense that the
symbolic and literal domain of fieldwork exists inside another form of life—entail-
ing crossing a boundary into it and exploring a cultural logic of enclosed differ-
ence (however fraught with difficulty the translation process is).

Once released from this mise-en-scène, complicity looks quite different. The
focus on a particular site of fieldwork remains, but now one is after a distinctly
different sort of knowledge, one for which metaphors of insideness or the cross-
ing of cultural boundaries are no longer appropriate.

In any particular location certain practices, anxieties, and ambivalences are
present as specific responses to the intimate functioning of nonlocal agencies and
causes—and for which there are no convincing common-sense understandings.24
The basic condition that defines the altered mise-en-scène for which complicity
rather than rapport is a more appropriate figure is an awareness of existential
doubleness on the part of both anthropologist and subject; this derives from having
a sense of being here where major transformations are under way that are tied to
things happening simultaneously elsewhere, but not having a certainty or authori-
tative representation of what those connections are. Indeed, there are so many
plausible explanations for the changes, no single one of which inspires more au-
thority than another, that the individual subject is left to account for the connec-
tions—the behind-the-scenes structure—and to read into his or her own narrative
the locally felt agency and effects of great and little events happening elsewhere.

Social actors are confronted with the same kind of impasses that academics
uncomfortably experience these days, and this affinity suggests the particular salience of the figure of complicity. But for the subjects of ethnography, these impasses are pragmatic problems that, for everyday life to proceed at all, require responses ranging from evasions and displacements to halfhearted investments in old theories or exotic constructions and idiosyncratic visions of the way the world works. In terms of the traditional mise-en-scène of fieldwork, most anthropologists have always understood themselves as being both inside and outside the sites in which they have been participant observers. That is, they have never naïvely thought that they could simply “go native” and in fact are critical of those among them who are so naive. Rather, they understand well that they always remain marginal, fictive natives at best. Still, they have always operated on the faith, necessary for the kind of knowledge that they produce, that they could be relatively more insiders than outsiders if only by mastering the skills of translation, sensitivity, and learned cultural competencies—in short, that they could achieve rapport.

In contrast, while it begins from the same inside-outside boundary positioning, investment in the figure of complicity does not posit the same faith in being able to probe the “inside” of a culture (nor does it presuppose that the subject herself is even on the “inside” of a culture, given that contemporary local knowledge is never only about being local). The idea of complicity forces the recognition of ethnographers as ever-present markers of “outsideness.” Never stirring from the boundary, their presence makes possible certain kinds of access that the idea of rapport and the faith in being able to get inside (by fiction à la Geertz, by utopian collaboration à la Clifford, or by self-deception à la Rosaldo) does not. It is only in an anthropologist-informant situation in which the outsideness is never elided and is indeed the basis of an affinity between ethnographer and subject that the reigning traditional ideology of fieldwork can shift to reflect the changing conditions of research.

What ethnographers in this changed mise-en-scène want from subjects is not so much local knowledge as an articulation of the forms of anxiety that are generated by the awareness of being affected by what is elsewhere without knowing what the particular connections to that elsewhere might be. The ethnographer on the scene in this sense makes that elsewhere present.25 It is not that this effect of fieldwork is currently unrecognized in anthropology, but it is always referenced in terms of an ethical discourse, and this frame does not get at what the more generative sense of the idea of complicity seeks to document.

This version of complicity tries to get at a form of local knowledge that is about the kind of difference that is not accessible by working out internal cultural logics. It is about difference that arises from the anxieties of knowing that one is somehow tied into what is happening elsewhere, but, as noted, without those connections being clear or precisely articulated through available internal cultural models. In effect, subjects are participating in discourses that are thoroughly lo-

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calized but that are not their own. Douglas Holmes, whose research is discussed later, uses the term “illicit discourse” to describe this phenomenon, in which fragments of local discourses have their origins elsewhere without the relationship to that elsewhere being clear. This uncertainty creates anxiety, wonder, and insecurity, in different registers, both in the ethnographer and in her subjects.

This recognition of a common predicament is the primary motivation for thinking about the changed conception of fieldwork relationships in terms of complicity. It would be possible to understand our emphasis on the figure of complicity as the achievement of a different kind of rapport, but it would be a mistake to identify it with the precise construction of that figure in the traditional mode. The investment in the figure of complicity rests on highlighting this contemporary external determination of local discourses, marked and set off by the fieldworker’s presence but free of the figures of rapport and collaboration that have traditionally characterized fieldwork. Free of these, complicity between an ethnographer whose outsideness is always prominent and a subject who is sensitive to the outside helps to materialize other dimensions that the dialogue of traditional fieldwork, conceived as taking place inside rapport, cannot get at as well. Only thus do we do escape the tendency to see change as a disruption of what was there before—a disruption of a world in which the anthropologist might have been more comfortable and on the “prior-ness” of which he or she can still rely in exercising the assumptions of the traditional mise-en-scène of fieldwork, even in a site undergoing massive and long-term changes. In such cases, the formative expressions of anxiety that construct cultures in change and boundaries between cultures are likely to be either missed or rationalized in terms of prior cultural logics. Only when an outsider begins to relate to a subject also concerned with outsideness in everyday life can these expressions be given focal importance in a localized fieldwork that, in turn, inevitably pushes the entire research program of the single ethnographic project into the challenges and promises of a multisited space and trajectory—a trajectory that encourages the ethnographer literally to move to other sites that are powerfully registered in the local knowledge of an originating locus of fieldwork. This is what the notion of complicity as an aid in the rethinking of fieldwork potentially offers.

According to its OED definitions, complicity, compared to rapport and collaboration, carries a heavier load of ethical meaning and implication. However, this ethical sense is very different when complicity is evoked as a critical probe of the traditional figure of rapport in the writing of Geertz, Clifford, and Rosaldo—among others—than when it becomes the central figure used to explore the mise-en-scène of fieldwork in new circumstances. The usual ethical questioning of the fieldwork relationship relies heavily on exploring the dynamics of the assumed unequal power relations between ethnographer and subject, always weighted structurally on the side of the ethnographer, who is implicated in Western colonialism (which, as I noted earlier, has stereotypically defined the broader context of
classic anthropological fieldwork). When the politicized nature of fieldwork has been highlighted in the past, it has been developed by calling anthropology to account for its colonial, and now postcolonial, complicities.

This predictable construction of the ethical issues involved in fieldwork has become far too limited a means of addressing current changing views of the mise-en-scène of fieldwork in the broader context of multisited research. With theoretical metanarratives and frames of world-systems processes now under prominent debate and reformulation, a broader contextual framing for any location of fieldwork is less available to ethnographers. The shifting boundaries of the ethnographic project, as described above, are moving speculatively into this broader frame itself, treating it ethnographically through the multisited trajectory of research. This is partly because of the noted inadequacy and loss of authority of both older and new formulations of metanarratives—like colonialism (or postcolonialism), Marxist political economy, and globalization (an as-yet poorly theorized, but apparently necessary, concept in wide currency)—and partly because of the changing nature of the kind of material sought from and offered by fieldwork subjects who think in terms of their connections beyond the local. This need to deal more directly with the broader context of focused research without the aid of adequate frames created by other kinds of scholarship leads to a much less determined and available context than does the history of colonialism, for example, in considering the politics and ethical implications of contemporary fieldwork. Likewise, as the figure frequently evoked in past critiques of fieldwork to probe the ethical problems of a too-innocent figure of rapport, complicity specifically plays to and constructs a different and more complex sense of the substance of the ethnographer-subject relationship.

The changing contextualization for assessing the ethical implication of complicity as the normal characterization of contemporary fieldwork relationships is reflected in the shifting power valences of these relationships, as the fieldworker moves from site to site, and the often ethically ambiguous management by the fieldworker of the accumulation of these developing relationships in specific situations. Of course, ethnographers have often been faced with such ethical issues within the villages and communities in which they have worked, but in multisited research, the broader context is in a sense entirely of the ethnographer’s and his informants’ own making, rather than attributable to more abstract and already morally loaded forces such as capitalism and colonialism. So, within the boundaries of a single project, the ethnographer may be dealing intimately and equivalently with subjects of very different class circumstances—with elites and subalterns, for instance—who may not even be known directly to one another or have a sense of the often indirect effects that they have on each other’s lives.

The ethical issues in multisited research are raised by the ethnographer’s movement among different kinds of affiliations within a configuration of sites evolving in a particular research project. The inequality of power relations,
weighted in favor of the anthropologist, can no longer be presumed in this world of multisited ethnography. The fieldworker often deals with subjects who share his own broadly middle-class identity and fears, in which case unspoken power issues in the relationship become far more ambiguous than they would have been in past anthropological research; alternatively, he may deal with persons in much stronger power and class positions than his own, in which case both the terms and limits of the ethnographic engagement are managed principally by them. Here, where the ethnographer occupies a marked subordinate relationship to informants, the issues of use and being used, of ingratiation, and of trading information about others elsewhere become matters of normal ethical concern, where they were largely unconsidered in previous discussions.

As I have remarked elsewhere the anthropologist, by virtue of these changing circumstances of research, is always on the verge of activism, of negotiating some kind of involvement beyond the distanced role of ethnographer, according to personal commitments that may or may not predate the project.27 To what extent and on what terms can such activism be indulged within the activity of ethnography, and what are the consequences of avoiding it or denying it altogether for the continued achievement of the “disinterestedness” that Geertz argued for in the traditional mise-en-scène of research? These are the questions that define the much more complicated ethical compass of contemporary fieldwork for which the past understanding of ethnography (in the throes of more abstract world historical forces) can no longer serve as an adequate frame of assessment.28

What complicity stands for as a central figure of fieldwork within this multisited context of research, and particularly as characterizing those relationships that work effectively to generate the kind of knowledge engaged with the outside that I evoked earlier, is an affinity, marking equivalence, between fieldworker and informant. This affinity arises from their mutual curiosity and anxiety about their relationship to a “third”—not so much the abstract contextualizing world system but the specific sites elsewhere that affect their interactions and make them complicit (in relation to the influence of that “third”) in creating the bond that makes their fieldwork relationship effective. This special sense of complicity does not entail the sort of evading fictions that Geertz described as anthropological irony, in which anthropologist and informant pretend to forget who and where they otherwise are in the world in order to create the special relationship of fieldwork rapport. Nor is this the covered-up complicity of fieldwork between the anthropologist and imperialism, as is described in Rosaldo’s essay. Rather, complicity here rests in the acknowledged fascination between anthropologist and informant regarding the outside “world” that the anthropologist is specifically materializing through the travels and trajectory of her multisited agenda. This is the OED sense of complicity that goes beyond the sense of “partnership in an evil action” to the sense of being “complex or involved,” primarily through the complex relationships to a third.
The shared imagination between anthropologist and informant that creates a space beyond the immediate confines of the local is also what projects the traditional site-specific mise-en-scène of fieldwork outward toward other sides. The loaded and more commonly acknowledged ethical implication of complicity glides here into its cognitive implication for the design and purview of fieldwork, turning the traditional mise-en-scène inside out. It will be recalled that for Rosaldo, the recognition of fieldwork as complicity was a stopping point for ethnography, a possibly paralyzing insight revealing how anthropology in its most self-justifying rhetoric participates in the broader context of an “evil partnership” with colonialism. In contrast, complicity as a defining element of multisited research is both more generative and more ambiguous morally; it demands a mapping onto and entry of the ethnographic project into a broader context that is neither so morally nor so cognitively determined as it appeared in previous critiques of rapport.

In conclusion, I want to offer a brief consideration of the developing research project of Douglas Holmes, in discussion with whom I worked out a number of the ideas presented in this paper concerning the value of recasting the mise-en-scène of fieldwork in terms of the figure of complicity. Holmes’s project traces and examines in situ the discourses of the contemporary European right, frequently placing him in disturbing relation to his subjects. It is thus a dramatic example of the politics of fieldwork in multisited space, where the risk of complicity in its full negatively moral sense of “evil partnership” is alive at several levels. Certainly not many of the several other arenas of research in which multisited agendas are emerging are as charged.29 Here there is the challenge of the fieldworker treating with a modicum of sympathy subjects whom, as a citizen, he would certainly otherwise oppose and revile. The doctrine of relativism, long considered a partial inoculation of the anthropologist against ethically questionable positions in far-off places, does not work as well in fieldwork among fascists and Nazis—the complicities of fieldwork relationships establishing strong affinities between ethnographer and subject in relation to a shared world or arena of discourse will not allow for a distancing relativism in the field. For Holmes, this problem is captured in his attempt to understand ethnographically the circulation of illicit discourse in contemporary Europe.

Illicit Discourse

Holmes’s project examines how cultural struggles are shaping European politics in the post-cold-war era. In explaining the background of his research, he writes: “The project has a prehistory that stretches back to the mid-1980s and the Friuli region of northeast Italy—the terrain of Carlo Ginzburg’s studies of sixteenth-century agrarian cults and inquisitorial persecutions.”30 Elsewhere he writes, “While pursuing an ethnographic portrayal of this domain, I
encountered for the first time what appeared to be a rough antipolitics that seemed to subvert the formation of an independent political outlook and identity. In subsequent years these marginal sensibilities and aspirations insinuated themselves into the heart of European political discourse. More recently, Holmes has made fieldwork sites of the European Parliament in Strasbourg and the offices of the openly racist and neofascist British National Party in the East End of London. From his work in Strasbourg, he has published a 1991 interview with Bruno Gollnisch, professor of Japanese law and literature at the University of Lyons, who was elected to the European Parliament as a member of the Technical Group of the European Right, the chairman of which is Jean-Marie Le Pen; and from his London fieldwork he has produced an interview with Richard Edmonds, who is the national organizer of the British National Party.

Holmes's project is to piece together the manifestations, resemblances, and appeals of certain related discourses that have made themselves present in settings like Friuli, Strasbourg, and East London, among others. For the most part, he is not guided by a map of transnational and transcultural "flows" or "scapes"—the cartographic or diagrammatic imagery is inapt for the discontinuous spaces in which he works. The lines of relationship between the discourses in these different sites are not at all charted, and this uncertainty or even mystery as to the genealogies in the spread of right-wing discourses is in part what makes them formidable to both analysts and those who wish to oppose them. What Holmes brings to the enterprise is an ethnographic ear for the perversions of discourse in different settings that mark and define the changing social character of the right. What is challenging about these discourses for the ethnographer is that they are not alien or marked off from respectable ranges of opinion but in fact have deep connections with them. They deserve to be listened to closely before being exoticized as a figment of the politically extreme or being ethically condemned too precipitously. This calculated and imposed naïveté, necessary for fieldwork to be conducted at all, is potentially the source of greatest strength and special insight of ethnographic analysis, leading to both the "complex or involved" sense of complicity as well as exposure to complicity's other sense, of "being an accomplice, partnership in an evil action."

The working conceptual frame for Holmes's multisited fieldwork—what conceptually defines the affinities among sites whose connections are not otherwise preestablished—lies in his notion of "illicit discourse," which he describes as follows:

An illicit discourse aims at reestablishing the boundaries, terms, and idioms of political struggle. The resulting political practice is deconstructive. Its authority is often parasitic, drawing strength from the corruption, ineptitude, obsolescence, and lost relevance of the established political dogmas and agendas. Its practitioners negotiate and map the points of contradiction and fatigue of particular positions. They scavenge the detritus of decaying politics,
probing areas of deceit and deception. By doing so they invoke displaced histories and reveal deformed moralities. They strive to introduce the unvoiced and unspeakable into public debate. Established political forces resist these "illicitudes," defining those who articulate them as racists, terrorists, bigots or as some form of essentialized pariah (italics mine).33

Different senses of the notion of complicity abound in Holmes's fieldwork. But the particular sense that is relevant to my argument here, and to other multisited research projects, concerns not the heightened ethical question of dealing with the odious from the necessarily open and cordial demeanor of the fieldworker wanting access, but the more subtle issue of the cognitive/intellectual affinity between the ethnographer and the purveyor of illicit discourse in different locations (as keyed by the statement that I have italicized in the quotation in the previous paragraph). Despite their very different values and commitments, the ethnographer and his subjects in this project are nevertheless broadly engaged in a pursuit of knowledge with resemblances in form and context that they can recognize. This constitutes the most provocative and potentially troubling sense of complicity in the fieldwork relationship.

What particularly struck Holmes in his fieldwork was the agile appropriation by people marked as objectionable of all sorts of registers of familiar discourse. He was being neither beguiled nor fooled by his informants—he was not complicit with them in this very direct normative sense. Rather, he was simply surprised by what was available in their discourse—its range of overlap and continuities with familiar and otherwise unobjectionable positions. When a researcher is dealing with extremes on either end of the political spectrum, the anthropological assumption is often that one is dealing with the cultlike, the exotic, and the enclosed (and, to some degree, anthropologists might be attracted to subjects in new terrains where they can analogically reproduce their traditional gaze). Extremists are supposed to be like exotic others, living within their own cosmologies and self-enclosed senses of the real. In such a construction, fieldwork complicity with them is highly artificial and not as troubling—it becomes, again, simply complicity to facilitate professional rapport. But when Holmes actually deals with as sophisticated and subtle a speaker as Gollnisch or as cunning a one as Edmonds, what is disrupted in the classic anthropological view is the notion that these speakers are "other"—that they have an "inside" that is distinctly not the fieldworker's.

While Holmes does not share his subjects' beliefs—nor does he fear being seduced in this way—he is complicit in many respects with their discourse and critical imaginary of what shapes political cultures in contemporary Europe. They share a taste for deconstructive logics and for, in short, understanding changes in terms of the infectious dynamics of illicit discourse. However differently they normatively view its operation, they share the same speculative wonder about it. By the fluid, appropriative capacity of right-wing discourse, Holmes finds himself

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being brought closer to his informants, who are accomplished ideologues/theorists/storytellers. His informants are as responsible for this connection (if not more so) as is Holmes—who, as fieldworker, would otherwise be thought of as the frame setter—and in this way, illicit discourse as experienced in fieldwork is particularly infectious.

Complicity not only raises difficult ethical questions here, but, in so doing, it also provides an opening to more general questions posed in “honest” intellectual partnership with fascists. What marks distinctive difference in the mise-en-scène of multisited fieldwork more generally is this unexpected affinity/complicity—more cognitive than ethical—between the fieldworker and the (in Holmes’s case) vile informant. Because they are not the usual subjects, the anthropologist looks for other connections that triangulate him and them, and this is what pushes the ethnography elsewhere—in search of other connections, other sites. Finally, Holmes does not fear moral complicity in his fieldwork relationships in any obvious way; rather, he is constantly in danger of becoming an accomplice in the mutual making of illicit discourse because of the commonalities of reference, analytic imaginary, and curiosity that fieldworker and subjects so productively share—each for their very different purposes.34

A Concluding Note

After a strong critical reflection in the 1980s upon the historical project of cultural anthropology as a discipline, articulated through an assessment of its rhetorical traditions, we are now in the midst of a rethinking of the ideology of its distinctive method of fieldwork. Much is at stake in this, since it touches upon the core activity that continues to define the discipline’s collective self-identity through every anthropologist’s defining experience. The figure of rapport has always been acknowledged as being too simplistic to stand for the actual complexities of fieldwork, but it has had—and continues to have—great influence as a regulative ideal in professional culture. As were many other issues concerning anthropology’s contemporary practice, the more troubling figure of complicity shadowing that of rapport was explored in Clifford Geertz’s landmark essays of the 1960s and 1970s, written with his signature turn-of-phrase style of deep insight combined with considerable ambivalence. He significantly furthered the anthropological tradition with renewed intellectual power while pragmatically managing the doubt that comes with any exertion of an acute critical capacity. The exercise undertaken in this paper, of amplifying the implication of this shadow figure of complicity for the changing circumstances of anthropological fieldwork without proposing it as a new regulative ideal, is offered in the continuing spirit of Geertz’s own seminal balancing of ethnography’s possibilities and problems at another, very different moment in the history of anthropology.
Notes


2. The most common source of this essay (“Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight”) is Clifford Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures (New York, 1973), 412–53, but it was first published → Daedalus 101 (Winter 1972): 1–37, and as an undergraduate at Yale, I first heard Geertz deliver a version of it at a colloquium in the mid-1960s. This essay was remarkable for its elegant condensation of virtually all of the major styles and moves that were to make interpretation within the context of ethnography such an attractive research program throughout the 1970s and 1980s, not only in anthropology but also especially in social history and in the new historicist trend in literary criticism, among other methods and disciplines. Segments of “Deep Play” could be easily appropriated as models for different tasks of cultural analysis as these were becoming prominent in a variety of fields. For example, the opening anecdote on which I focus served as a model of the kind of fieldwork story that gets the writer into the material. The rhetorical technique of opening with such a story was to become a major (and now perhaps, dully repetitive) strategy of both writing and analysis in ethnographic, historical, and literary scholarship.


4. Ibid., 416.

5. By now, the literature of fieldwork accounts as well as the critical literature on fieldwork itself are both vast and diverse. For recent assessments in line with the argument here, see Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, eds., Culture, Power, Place: Explorations in Critical Anthropology (Durham, N.C., 1997); Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, eds., The Concept of Fieldwork in Anthropology (Berkeley, 1997); George E. Marcus, ed., Critical Anthropology Now: Unexpected Contexts, Shifting Constituencies, New Agendas (Santa Fe, 1997); and George E. Marcus, “Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography,” Annual Review of Anthropology 24 (1995): 95–117.


8. See, for example, Arjun Appadurai, Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization (Minneapolis, 1996), and Susan Harding and Fred Myers, eds., Further Inflections: Toward Ethnographies of the Future, theme issue of Cultural Anthropology 9, no. 3 (1994).


10. We can compare the relative inattention of Geertz to broader complicities of presence (characteristic of the scholarly zeitgeist of the development era of the 1950s and 1960s) to Renato Rosaldo’s explicit reflection on his own circumstantial complicity with the historic forces of colonialism (characteristic of a post-1970s zeitgeist in which tales like that of the cockfight incident can no longer be told innocently).


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distance not only remains possible but is considered the most desirable outcome, to James Clifford’s reassessment of Marcel Griaule in the field: James Clifford, “Power and Dialogue in Ethnography: Marcel Griaule’s Initiation,” in Observers Observed: Essays on Ethnographic Fieldwork, ed. George Stocking (Madison, 1983), 121–56, one of the key works that placed anthropological fieldwork intimately in colonial context. The way to knowledge for Griaule is through a certain humbling, which puts the desirability of the return to the anthropological “vocation” in doubt.

15. In Clifford Geertz’s recently published, memoirlike After the Fact (Cambridge, Mass., 1995), written with the hindsight knowledge of the murderous turbulence that was to sweep through Indonesia following his years of fieldwork, there is this same matter-of-fact noting of the broader historic dramas and contexts of moments of anthropological fieldwork. These are conveyed with a weary resignation, in which striking insights are encompassed in turns of phrase full of the kind of detachment and wryness that has angered his younger critics.
18. Again, Clifford’s essay on Marcel Griaule is probably his most explicit and strongest piece on the colonial context and shaping of fieldwork relations. Interestingly, neither Clifford nor the OED points to the very common and darker connotation of the term collaboration that arose with its special use during World War II (as in collaborating with Nazis in occupied countries). In this sense, the connection of the term with complicity is of course most prominent.
19. This more complicated and contemporary broader context has begun to be constructed as a rhetorical, theoretical, and ethnographic exercise—for example, in the “Public Culture” project as reflected in the journal of that name and in the recent volume, cited above, by Appadurai, Modernity at Large. Also important for thinking about the scene of fieldwork in the different broader context of global political economy is the formulation of and debate about the notion of “reflexive modernization”; see Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, and Scott Lash, Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition, and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order (Stanford, 1994). It should be noted that Clifford’s more recent work is a strong move beyond his earlier concentration on the historical context and conventions of the ethnographic mise-en-scène; see his Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century (Cambridge, Mass., 1997).
21. Ibid., 69–70.
22. From Mikhail Bakhtin, Speech Genres and Other Essays, quoted in Paul Willeman, Looks and Frictions: Essays in Cultural Studies and Film Theory (Bloomington, Ind., 1994), 199.
23. In addition to the general discussions on the emergence of multisited ethnography, referenced in note 4, see, for a very specific example, the excellent description by Sherry Ortner of the materialization of this multisited space in her fieldwork among the now dispersed members of her high school class,” Sherry B. Ortner, “Ethnography Among the Newark: The Class of ’58 of Weequahic High School,” Michigan Quarterly Review 32, no. 3 (1993).
24. Discussions about reflexive modernization (see note 19) are for me the most searching theoretical discussions available of this mode of being.
25. Geertz saw this clearly, but he argued that the anthropologist and the informant, joined in the complicity of “anthropological irony,” blunted these insights in a calculated way.
through the achievement of rapport by mutual, self-interested, and pragmatic fictions. The sense of complicity that I evoke here is quite different; it is based precisely on the anthropologist and his subject not engaging in the fictions that achieve rapport.

26. Under the powerful stimulus of postcolonial studies that have emerged through the writings of scholars such as Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha, and those of the Subaltern Studies group, an important body of work in anthropology has developed reassessing both colonialism and its legacies. In reflecting new exchanges between anthropology and history as well (especially those that have come out of the University of Michigan and the University of Chicago), it has made ethnography’s traditional broader context of colonialism itself a complex object of study. While this work overlaps somewhat with the as-yet halting attempts to provide large, systematic perspectives on what is meant by the term globalization, its program still remains within a frame that I believe takes a more conservative position on challenging the regulative ideology of ethnographic practice. As such, the ethical critique of fieldwork in this body of scholarship, although immensely enriched, is still expressed restrictively in terms of anthropology’s complicity with colonialism and its legacies-categories that do not encompass the diversity of fieldwork relationships that have been created in anthropology’s contemporary forays into, for example, science studies, media studies, and political economy.


28. The more complex ethical compass of multisited research can be read into Emily Martin’s pioneering Flexible Bodies: The Role of Immunity in American Culture from the Days of Polio to the Age of AIDS (Boston, 1994). While the explicit discussions of complicities operating in this research are not that developed or rich in Martin’s book, she does map very well the special kind of moral economy that emerges from doing multisited fieldwork.

29. Multisited projects are beginning to emerge prominently in the forays of anthropological research into media studies, the study of science and technology (an outgrowth of the diverse interests of the prominent subfield of medical anthropology), the study of environmental and indigenous social movements, the study of development through the activity of NGOs (nongovernmental organizations), the study of art worlds, and the study of diasporas. I myself learned the methodological issues of multisited research through my long-term study of dynastic families and fortunes, and the worlds that they make for others; George E. Marcus, Lives in Trust: The Fortunes of Dynastic Families in Late-Twentieth-Century America (Boulder, 1992). While none of these arenas have generated projects with ethical issues of complicity quite as stark as the ones Douglas Holmes has encountered in his fieldwork among the European right, each does place anthropologist and local subject in uncomfortable, but interesting, relationships of mutual complicity in relation to an imagined world of outside sites of activity in which they have very different interests.


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As a citizen, experiencing events largely from a distance and through the available media of journalism, one is inoculated against the heterogeneous seductions of the odious—but not as an ethnographer. For example, an Italian reader of Holmes's Gollnisch interview was not at all impressed with Gollnisch's discourse, which he found easy to see through and situate. This reader responded from an activist political position on the left, whose own discourse has a long history of being shaped by an embedded dialectic of distanced relationship to the changing guises of the European right. But close-up, from the necessary openness of ethnography, Gollnisch is seductive, at least for a moment. This persuasiveness of the moment makes illicit discourse effective in its own political project just as it pulls the ethnographer in as well, making him an accomplice even as it does so in the name of the latter's own distinctive scholarly project, conceived in a tradition of disinterested fieldwork.