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To Be or Not to Be a Humanist?: Anthropological Stage Fright in the Age of Cultural Relativism

Robin Blyn

The strange centrality of Hamlet in Laura Bohannan's *Shakespeare in the Bush* (1966) and Clifford Geertz's *From the Native's point of view* (1974) effectively hides from interpretive anthropology in its formative years its own anxieties about the consequences of relativism for ethnographic authority. By returning to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Bohannan's and Geertz's essays return, ironically, to the universalist paradigm they each ostensibly reject. Hamlet, then, becomes the contested site wherein each essay discovers its inability to authorize the agenda it has set for itself. Specifically, the Shakespearean text becomes the site wherein cultural relativism as an epistemological stance fails to authorize the ethnographic subjects who have, however unwittingly, come to its defense. It is precisely because of the anxieties it provokes that interpretive anthropology's paradigm of cultural relativism continues to haunt even our most contemporary theories of cross-cultural contact.

To be or not to be a humanist? That is not the question. Not amid the protracted intellectual labor that attends the birth of interpretive anthropology and its uneven assimilation into the American academy in the decade that stretches from 1965 to 1975. Not as the grounds for cross-cultural interpretation and its representation in the privileged genre of the ethnographic study are radically destabilized in a highly politicized landscape responsive to the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights movement, and the host of programs for liberation and dissent that attend both. *To be or not to be a humanist? That is not the question.* Not even as anthropology tests and contests the structuralist and cognitive paradigms marshaled in the aftermath of the reign of functionalism and Bronislaw Malinowski's scientific method. For even as American anthropology undertakes its reinvention of the relativist ethos of the 1920s and 30s, to arrive, finally,

at a concept of “man,” as Clifford Geertz would put it, grounded in a concept of culture as a symbolic system, the discipline remains committed to the study of something called the “human.”¹

To be or not to be a humanist? No, that is not the question, and questions, of course, are of the essence because, as the thoroughgoing and interdisciplinary critique of the scientific method suggests, the shape of the question will inevitably shape the conclusions at which the investigator arrives. *How to redefine the human, that is the question*, the question that animates anthropology’s own self-reflections in the years in which interpretive anthropology emerges as a premier practice in American anthropology. It is precisely in the context of a reinvention of the human dependent on a concept of culture that is itself insistently relative, I want to suggest, that Shakespearean tragedy repeatedly joins company with anthropology in the drama of ethnography’s quest for its own legitimacy. Such is the case in Laura Bohannan’s 1966 narrative essay “Shakespeare in the Bush” and in Clifford Geertz’s 1974 theoretical self-defense, “From the Native’s Point of View.” In both, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* serves as an index of (1) the extent to which interpretive anthropology depends upon a cultural relativism it only admits with pained hesitation and (2) the extent to which this vexed revival of cultural relativism comes to serve, in Mary Louise Pratt’s terms, as an anti-conquest narrative, a narrative in which Western subjects “seek to secure their innocence in the same moment as they assert [Western] hegemony” (7).

The strange centrality of *Hamlet* in “Shakespeare in the Bush” and “From the Native’s Point of View” effectively hides from interpretive anthropology in its formative years its own anxieties about the consequences of relativism for ethnographic authority. By returning to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Bohannan’s and Geertz’s essays return, ironically, to the universalist paradigm they each ostensibly reject. *Hamlet*, then, becomes the contested site wherein each essay discovers its inability to authorize the agenda it has set for itself. Specifically, the Shakespearean text becomes the site wherein cultural relativism as an epistemological stance fails to authorize the ethnographic subjects who have, however unwittingly, come to its defense. It is precisely because of the anxieties it provokes that interpretive anthropology’s paradigm of cultural relativism

¹ For accounts of the emergence of interpretive anthropology and its historical context see Kuper; Marcus and Fischer; and Ortner.

continues to haunt even our most contemporary theories of cross-cultural contact.

In recent literary theory, as in anthropological metacriticism, "Shakespeare" testifies to a crisis in authority.² Distinct to the anthropological discourse, however, is the explicit link between authority and a concept of the human. For unlike the postmodern and poststructural theorists Marjorie Garber studies in her analysis of Shakespearean returns in literary theory, anthropology of the 1960s and 70s never relinquishes the human as its object of study and as its authorizing ground. Nowhere is this clearer than in Laura Bohannan's widely anthologized "Shakespeare in the Bush." Relativist in its ethos, Bohannan's essay conveys simultaneously the politically enabling potential in this relativism, and the colonizing force it both seeks to correct and runs the risk of reproducing. It is only in the context of this emergent relativist ethos, I want to suggest, that the stakes of Geertz's "From the Native's Point of View" come into focus. Ultimately, the Shakespearean negotiations that characterize Bohannan's and Geertz's essays reveal the central anxiety surrounding the genesis of interpretive anthropology: a definition of the human understood in terms of culture, in terms, that is, of culturally relative symbolic systems. Within the context of this reinvention of the human, *Hamlet* becomes an index of the anthropological stage fright that plagues the most contemporary practitioners of anthropology and the most recent critiques of relativism generated by the humanities and the political left.³

² The most glaring exception, of course, is Harold Bloom, who, as the title of his most recent work on the subject suggests, continues to identify Shakespeare with "The Invention of the Human."

³ Identified with postmodernism, the very idea of "cultural relativism" continues to be reviled and defended by voices hailing from a range of disciplines. Ironically, the often shrill and highly politicized debates over relativism have managed to cross the divide between the sciences and the humanities, the university and the political arena, as few debates have. According to anthropologist Renato Rosaldo, it is a "raging battle" over nothing less than "competing political and intellectual visions," and a response to questions as large and fraught with significance as "what counts as knowledge and critical thought" and how best to "prepare students to enter the changing multicultural world. . ." (218-219). In its apparent challenge to "objective truth" and transcendentally authorized meaning, anti-relativism allows, as Rosaldo contends, for a strange alliance between scientists and political conservatives.

1. Among Those Who Know Things

Contemporary ethnography identified with the postmodern often points to Laura Bohannan as one of its most prescient predecessors. For George Marcus, Michael Fischer, and James Clifford, Bohannan serves as a prototype for the kind of disciplinary critique and re-evaluation to which they commit themselves. Intuiting the affinities between narrative fiction and ethnography, Bohannan uses the creative essay and the novel to foreground the subjective nature of cross-cultural interpretation and the rhetorical construction of authority in the ethnographic text. Intent on exposing ethnography's historical complicity with imperialism, on providing access to the native's point of view, and on defending relativism as the only recourse for an ethnographic practice attentive to its own political implications, Bohannan's work provides a striking prefiguration of the postmodern agenda for the field. As early as 1954, under the cover of the pen name "Elinore Bowen," Bohannan explores in the form of the novel the problem of cross-cultural judgment in the context of cultural relativism. Her *Return to Laughter* is a novel devoted to the moral dilemmas and struggles for authority met by a young anthropologist in West Africa. In its final chapter, the protagonist reveals both the complexity of relativism and the problem of cross-cultural judgment embedded in it:

I had held that knowledge is worth the acquisition. I had willingly accepted the supposition that one cannot learn save by suppressing one's prejudices, or, at the very least holding them morally in abeyance. The trouble lay in my careless assumption that it would be only "prejudices" that were to be involved, and never my "principles" – it had not occurred to me that the distinction between "prejudice" and "principle" is itself a matter of "prejudice." (290-291)

In her epiphany that "principles" are context-dependent, and thus inseparable from "prejudice," the narrator of Bohannan's novel recognizes the colonizing potential of ethnographic method and discourse. Unable to escape the prejudices of her own culture, she implies that the proper goal is for the ethnographer to hold her principles "morally in abeyance," just as she would her more explicitly understood "prejudices." Hence, it is judgment that is disclaimed, and in its place comes "tolerance." Having discovered that "[i]t is an error to assume that to know is to understand and to understand is to like," "tolerance" be-

comes the proper position of the ethnographer. "That is what tolerance is," she writes, "allowing each man his own integrity. Not an eclectic picking of convenient moral maxims for oneself" (291). The novel ends with a return to relativism, sensitized to discursive colonization, however more humble in its goals.

Yet, rather than pursuing what it would mean to hold one's principles "in abeyance" and conduct ethnography, *Return to Laughter* ends in a cross-cultural and democratizing scene of laughter, as if the problem had been solved. Bohannan's later work, however, conveys that the recovered authority of the ethnographer and the rejection of universalism both remain radically unstable. The widely anthologized "Shakespeare in the Bush" (1966) is a paradigmatic example. Not only does the essay insist on a relativist epistemology, but it also requires that the Western ethnographer become the object of the native's own ethnographic study of its Western visitor. Ultimately, the essay's embrace of cultural relativism, and its consequent attempt to convey the natives as collaborative equals in the ethnographic process, founders precisely where it stakes its claims: in the ghostly repetitions of Shakespearean drama.

Much of the charm and humor of "Shakespeare in the Bush" lies in the way Bohannan's narrator, an ethnographer at work in one of the remotest sections of West Africa, emerges as the buffoon. Before the essay is over, she becomes the ethnographic object of the African Elders, and the victim of her own belief that, as she claims, great literature can be understood universally. The essay begins anecdotally, in Oxford, where a pretentious British friend tells the narrator that "You Americans" cannot understand Shakespeare. "One can easily misinterpret the universal," he tells her, "by misunderstanding the particular" (78). In response to the cultural particularism and condescension of her British friend, the narrator responds with a democratically inspired and universalist view of human kind. "I protested," she reports, "that human nature is pretty much the same the whole world over; at least the general plot and motivation of the greater tragedies would always be clear — everywhere — although some of the details in custom might have to be explained and difficulties of translation might produce slight changes" (78). The set up is clear; the narrator assigns herself the job of divining and communicating the "one universally . . . intelligible" interpretation of *Hamlet* (79-80), a dual task doomed to a failure as hyperbolic as its aims. In the remainder of the essay, *Hamlet*, the representative of univer-

sal human nature, will necessarily become evidence of the relative means by which the universal is defined.

Ironically, the narrator voices the very prejudice that the West African Elders will unwittingly challenge in the remaining pages of the essay, that is, a “universal” view of humankind predicated on the “particular” point of view of the West. When she attempts to translate the story of *Hamlet* for the Tiv Elders, they reinterpret the particulars so thoroughly that the whole requires an entirely different interpretation, one which acknowledges that the tale has been woven into the fabric of the West African cultural values, prejudices, and storytelling tradition. As the narrator sets up the defining conflict of the drama, she meets immediate resistance. According to the Tiv, not only is it right and proper for a brother to assume the role of “Chief” after his brother dies, it is also expected that he will take his dead brother’s wife immediately as his own. The Oedipal complex has no currency in the Tiv, and madness can only be caused by witchcraft. Hence, Hamlet’s feigned madness becomes instead the true measure of Claudius’ malevolence. As the chief Elder insists, “[i]f his father’s brother had indeed been wicked enough to bewitch Hamlet and make him mad, that would be a good story indeed, for it would be his fault that Hamlet, being mad, no longer had any sense and thus was ready to kill his father’s brother” (“Shakespeare” 86). *Hamlet*, the narrator observes, “no longer seemed quite the same story to me” (86), and given the relativist agenda of the essay, it most certainly is not.

Yet, despite the essay’s vigorous defense of a relativism sensitized to politics, ultimately the text reveals the limitations of its own relativist ethos. In “Shakespeare in the Bush,” the Tiv Elders present their interpretation of *Hamlet* not as an alternative reading, but as the right one. They thus not only reproduce the narrator’s own desire to pose as expert of an “other” cultural text, they also reproduce her misguided universalist presumptions. “I told you,” one Elder declares, “that if we knew more about the Europeans, we would find they really were very like us” (81), a point reiterated by the Chief Elder in the last rueful lines of the essay. “Sometime [. . .] you must tell us some more stories of your country,” he tells the narrator. “We, who are elders, will instruct you in their true meaning, so that when you return to your own land your elders will see that you have not been sitting in the bush, but among those who know things and who have taught you wisdom” (88). The critical irony here is that while the narrator’s universalist approach

to great literature is thoroughly debunked, the African Elders replicate her error; they presume that there is one correct interpretation that learned men the world over will recognize as such. Bohannan's readers conclude the essay sharing with her the final joke: the only universal property is the desire to universalize. Cultural relativism wins the day, but equality does not. The Western readership is enlightened; the Africans remain in the dark, in the dark ages, that is, of a moribund construction of human nature.

In Bohannan's essay, the hidden imperialist mechanisms of ethnography have thus only apparently been exposed and dismissed. The essay remains unaware that the cultural relativism it offers as a cure has reproduced the same imperialist symptoms inherent in the original universalist disorder. In other words, even as Bohannan's parody undermines the authority of the Western ethnographer and renders her the object of African observation, it implies a reciprocity that veils the power dynamics of the exchange; it becomes an "anti-conquest narrative," a narrative that surreptitiously confirms Western hegemony. The hero of the story is neither the anthropologist in West Africa nor the African Elders who correct her story for her. It is the Western ethnographer writing the parody of ethnographic method within the legitimating context of the academy who controls the translation of *Hamlet*'s tragedy into professional farce. The exchange of oral storytelling transacted in the Tiv under the authority of the Elders acquires its cultural capital only as an ethnographic text. The ethnographic authority of Bohannan's narrator is sacrificed to the Tiv Elders only to be sacrificed again to the Western author of "Shakespeare in the Bush." Which is to say that *Hamlet* – whether authorized by Shakespeare or by the Tiv Elders – testifies to a crisis in ethnographic authority even as it hides it from view.⁴

⁴ In terms of ethnographic authority, the will to universalize plays a complex role. Retelling *Hamlet* has ultimately confirmed cultural differences only to minimize their import. The presumption of a shared human instinct, in the form of the desire to universalize, overrides the force of the relativist critique. Thus it is only by representing a concept of human nature that crosses cultural borders, that appears even in the most isolated hillock and homestead of the African Tiv, that the implied author grounds her relativist agenda. Embodied most explicitly in the figure of the chief Elder, universalism becomes at once an "other" discourse and the discourse of the dead father. Intellectually backward, the Tiv Elders carry the same weight of displacement as Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Both allow the implied author to embrace relativism without relinquishing a concept of the human independent of culture, without that is, giving up the ghost.

2. Perilous Waters

Bohannan's 1966 essay is striking for the extent to which it grapples with the consequences of shifting the ground of the human, the very problem that defines interpretive anthropology as articulated by Clifford Geertz in his 1973 collection, *The Interpretation of Culture*. For if, as Marjorie Garber writes, "Shakespeare" is the towering figure he is in contemporary literary theory because of the crisis of authority he embodies (11), so, too, Geertz's monumental and controversial status in contemporary anthropology is an effect of the crisis in ethnographic authority his work struggles to hide from view. That Geertz's work in the early 70s returns with an almost compulsive consistency to "Shakespeare" is thus not as arbitrary as it might seem at first glance. Yet, it is not merely a matter of unconscious identification. Rather, in Geertz's essays "Shakespeare" functions as the means by which Geertz veils his own dissatisfaction with a concept of man dependent on a concept of culture, that is, with a concept of the human premised on a concept of culturally relative symbolic systems.

Geertz's ever so slippery redefinition of the "human" can be seen specifically as an expression of his ambivalence specifically about cultural relativism. In the now classic essays published in *The Interpretation of Culture*, Geertz provides his theory and practice of interpretive anthropology, offering some of his most important contributions to the field. As Sherry Ortner writes, Geertz's most radical move was "to argue that culture is not something locked inside people's heads, but rather is embodied in public symbols, symbols through which the members of society communicate their worldview, value-orientations, ethos, and all the rest to one another, to future generations – and to anthropologists" (129). Geertz thus frees ethnographers from needing to "get into the minds" of the peoples they study. Rather, culture becomes a "product of acting social beings trying to make sense of the world" (Ortner, 130). To interpret culture is to interpret its texts and the way that human agents understand them. In this way, Geertz is able to counter the colonial force of universalism without brooking the threat to ethnographic authority that Bohannan finds in her commitment to relativism. Interpretive anthropology, as constructed and articulated by Geertz, is both anti-universalism and, as a recent essay puts it, "anti anti-relativism." Relativism itself, we can say, is a "principle" it continues to hold "in abeyance."

It is indeed the rhetorical construction of interpretive anthropology which belies Geertz's anxieties about cultural relativism. For though Geertz asserts that human nature is insistently context-dependent, that the very nature of the human could not exist without culture, that "humanity is as various in its essence as it is in its expression" ("Impact" 36), he is loath to cede "the basic unity of mankind" (36). Humans are humans, across cultures and times, because they are cultural beings, however various their cultures may be. In this formulation, Geertz is able to evade what he calls the "perilous waters of relativism" and what he sees as the twin dangers they represent: historical and cultural determinism. The waters of relativism are "perilous" to Geertz because:

... if one discards the notion that Man, with a capital "M," is to be looked for "behind," "under," or "beyond" his customs and replaces it with the notion that man, uncapitalized, is to be looked for "in" them, one is in some danger of losing sight of him altogether. Either he dissolves, without residue, into his time and place, a child and a perfect captive of his age, or he becomes a conscripted soldier in a vast Tolstoian army, engulfed in one or another of the terrible historical determinisms with which we have been plagued from Hegel forward. ("Impact" 36)

Though it depends upon a context-dependent view of human nature and culture, interpretive anthropology officially refuses to be allied with relativism precisely because it associates relativism with an erasure of subjective agency. This simultaneous dependence upon and rejection of relativism is so definitional to his construction of interpretive anthropology that some thirty years later Geertz can attack "anti-relativism" without defending relativism or identifying himself with its project. In his 1984 "Anti Anti-Relativism" he declares that anti-relativism, an alliance of scientists and political conservatives, has "concocted the anxieties from which it lives" (50). Those anxieties, the ones that Geertz most energetically dismisses, turn out to include the very concerns voiced by Bohannan's narrator in *Return to Laughter*: the problem of cross-cultural evaluation, or, in anthropological terms, ethnographic authority.

It is precisely the challenge to ethnographic authority that Geertz most rigorously denies. In 1974 Geertz calls "bogey" the fear that a context-dependent view of the "human" leads to the view "that anything one group of people is inclined toward doing is worthy of respect" ("Impact" 44), while in 1991 he asserts that the dread of relativism propagated by anti-relativism is "unfounded" precisely because "the

moral and intellectual consequences that are commonly supposed to flow from relativism – subjectivism, nihilism, incoherence, Machiavellianism, ethical idiocy, esthetic blindness, and so on – do not in fact do so and the promised rewards of escaping its clutches, mostly having to do with pasteurized knowledge, are illusory" ("Anti Anti-Relativism" 46). All the while, however, Geertz distinguishes interpretive anthropology from the perilous waters of relativism. However he demystifies "anti-relativism," relativism itself remains a source of anxiety in the Geertzian project, and at the heart of that anxiety is the threat it poses to ethnographic authority, a threat that, perhaps, Geertz protesteth too much.

The almost compulsive return to Shakespeare in his metacritical essays belies the uncompromised authority of the ethnographer that they so vigorously defend. There is no essay which illustrates these veiled anxieties more precisely than "From the Native's Point of View" (1974), an essay which explicitly and emphatically reclaims ethnographic authority in the wake of the publication of Malinowski's diary. As Geertz himself concedes, the publication of Malinowski's *Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term* in 1967 sounds at once the last gasp of the scientific method and the myth of "the anthropologist as hero." As the sordid details of Malinowski's diary become public, the scientific and mystical grounds for ethnographic authority reveal themselves as self-interested constructions.⁵ How, Geertz ponders, is anthropology to construe its work in the aftermath of the demystification of the scientific method and "the myth of the chameleon fieldworker perfectly self-tuned to his exotic surroundings" ("Native's Point" 56)? Given that "we can no longer claim some unique form of psychological closeness, a sort of transcultural identification, with our subjects" (56), Geertz asks, how can anthropology continue to strive and to claim to see from the native's point of view?

⁵ The reception of Malinowski's diary earned its controversial status only because the politics of ethnography – its historic complicity with colonization, its tendency to erase the native's point of view, its propensity for ahistorical and apolitical "structures" – had themselves become increasing sources of controversy within the field. Just as Malinowski is dead, so, too, effectively, is Levi-Strauss, and if Parsons, Marx, and Boas are revived in the construction of interpretive anthropology, it is in the service of "a self-chosen attribution of paternity" that never quite gives up the ghosts of the fathers it leaves behind (Garber 176).

Never proffering a question without delivering an answer, Geertz moves quickly to a response that reiterates the program of interpretive anthropology outlined in his earlier essays. Rather than attempting the impossible task of seeing from the native's point of view, Geertz maintains, the interpretive anthropologist is more appropriately focused on seeing the native's point of view from a perspective prohibited the native himself. Geertz turns to his own work as an anthropologist to demonstrate the investigation of "selfhood" and culturally specific philosophies he sees as the legitimate alternative to pretending to "put [...] oneself in someone else's skin" ("Native's Point" 58). In his characteristically confident tone, Geertz summarizes his attempts to determine how people "define themselves as persons, what goes into the idea they have (but, as I say, only half-realize they have) of what a self . . . is" (58). Rather than imagining himself as "a rice peasant or a tribal shiekh," Geertz explains, his success is dependent on his ability to analyze "words, images, institutions, behaviors" (58). The program is clear. Ethnographic authority inheres in the ethnographer's expertise in analyzing symbolic systems. Attention to such symbolic systems allows the anthropologist to articulate a culturally specific model of subjectivity and epistemological frame. Art forms will testify to the art of constructing the self, an art that Geertz will liken to the art of Shakespearean drama.

It is, in fact, in Geertz's return to "Shakespeare," and specifically to *Hamlet*, that his essay reveals the crisis in ethnographic authority underwriting the confident prose. In his discussion of his approach to the Balinese version of "selfhood," Geertz refers to "Shakespeare" to substantiate two mutually exclusive positions. Initially, "Shakespeare" serves Geertz as an index of cultural difference. In Bali, Geertz contends, "Shakespeare's old-trouper view of the vanity of action in the face of mortality – all the world's a stage and we but poor players, content to strut our hour, and so on" makes no sense. Rather in Bali, "[there] is no make believe; of course players perish, but the play does not, and it is the latter, the performed rather than performer, that really matters" ("Native's Point" 62). Here, Shakespeare references an outmoded essentialist view of the subject, one that has no currency in a Balinese society that sees "selfhood" in performative terms. As opposed to the Bohannan narrator, Geertz here refuses to see "Shakespeare" as the representative of a universal human nature. Indeed, in this instance, interpretive anthropology is valuable for Geertz in so far as it reveals the lie of the universal.

It is all the more striking that only two pages later Geertz returns to Shakespeare to demonstrate a human response that crosses cultural boundaries. The context is Geertz's discussion of Balinese "lek," understood as a kind of stage fright, a "fear that, for want of skill or self-control, or perhaps by mere accident, an aesthetic illusion will not be maintained, that the actor will show through his part" (64). Within this discussion, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* suddenly makes a cameo appearance, and it does so in such a way as to draw analogies not only between Western and non-Western cultural production, but between the native object and the ethnographic subject. After offering his definition of lek, Geertz exemplifies the cultural condition as follows:

Aesthetic distance collapses, the audience (and the actor) lose sight of Hamlet and gain it, uncomfortably for all concerned, of bumbling John Smith painfully miscast as the Prince of Denmark. In Bali, the case is the same: what is feared is that the public performance to which one's cultural location commits one will be botched and that the personality . . . of the individual will break through to dissolve his standardized public identity. (64)

Using the stage, the privileged analogy of ritual theory, Geertz underscores the social performance of the Balinese subject; the bounded location of the culture becomes the subject's stage.⁶ By drawing an analogy between the anxious performance of the Balinese and the production of *Hamlet*, Geertz, however unwittingly, removes it from the specificity of its context. Balinese subjectivity becomes an art form like Shakespearean drama, one that reveals its investments most clearly when it gives itself away.⁷

The example of *Hamlet* effectively challenges the thesis of cultural location upon which "From the Native's Point of View" depends. Moreover, it simultaneously draws attention to the Western subject whose performance is most severely under scrutiny in the essay: the

⁶ Geertz himself analyzes the benefits and limitations of the "stage" analogy in "Blurred Genres: The Refiguration of Social Thought." His comments seem to speak to his own usage of the analogy here: "It can expose some of the profoundest features of social process, but at the expense of making vividly disparate matters look drably homogeneous" (28).

⁷ As the dissolution of the standardized public identity, Balinese "lek" is thus not all that different than the effect Hamlet seeks to provoke in Claudius with his "Mouse Trap" production. Like the "Mouse Trap" performance, the account of Balinese stage fright draws attention to its own self-reflexivity, its status as a metacommentary on the action proper. Balinese "lek" is a play within the play of ethnographic authority. See *Hamlet*.

ethnographer. Inescapably, then, the essay provides a neat parable for the stage fright of the post-Malinowski ethnographer attending – and attending to – the performance, here, by Clifford Geertz. Like the Balinese performer, the ethnographer similarly makes his observations from a cultural location, a dislocated stage, and lives in danger, especially in 1974, of “botching” his role in such a way as to “dissolve his standardized public identity.” *Hamlet* erupts into Geertz’s essay just as “aesthetic distance collapses,” performing textually that which it seeks to explicate “from the native’s point of view.” Represented in terms of *Hamlet*, Geertz’s discussion of Balinese “lek” can be seen not only as a self-reflexive inset in his own argument, but as the rupture in the argument that reveals the entire essay as compulsively self-reflexive. Rather than confirming his thesis that cultural location plays a pre-eminent role in the definition of the human, Geertz’s essay reveals a human subject essentially recognizable in each of the locations the essays visits: Java, Bali, Morocco, and – thanks to “Shakespeare” – the Western academy.

3. Humanism and the Posthuman

Both Bohannan’s recuperation of relativism and Geertz’s evasion of it are rife with significance for a contemporary anthropology that claims interpretive anthropology as its critical antecedent. While self-identified postmodern ethnography describes itself as “interpretive anthropology,” it identifies its practice as “nothing other than relativism rearmed and strengthened for an era of intellectual ferment, not unlike, but vastly more complex than that in which it was formulated” (Marcus and Fischer, 33). Like Bohannan’s narrator in her 1954 novel, “contemporary interpretive anthropology” (33) seeks a return to relativism more rigorously aware of the colonizing potential of cross-cultural interpretation than were its predecessors. Writers such as George Marcus, Michael Fischer, James Clifford, and Sherry Ortner thus all place their “practice” in a liminal, experimental moment, unsure of the form ethnography will take. Unwilling to return to the ground of the human so closely allied with universalism and colonial domination, these practitioners see ethnographic authority as inseparable from global power relations.

Even as they serve as precedents for the “rearming” of relativism, Bohannan and Geertz offer a compelling prefiguration of the critique of relativism tendered by the humanities and the political left. This critique

is different in kind from the self-proclaimed “anti-relativism” constituted by scientists and political conservatives, who object to the absence of either objective truth or transcendental meaning.⁸ From the perspective of these “anti-relativists,” relativism is anarchic, amoral, and solipsistic. Emergent in the last two decades of the twentieth century, however, is an inquiry into relativism that does not seek to protect “truth” and “meaning” from politics nor to evade the critique of humanism enabled by French poststructural theory. Indeed, the most trenchant critique of relativism appears to come from the critics who have learned the most from it. Nowhere is this clearer than in the influential work of Satya Mohanty, who argues for a “positive posthuman conception of the human” precisely because, he contends, relativism and its emphasis on radical difference have prohibited a politics that can correct or protect against the domination of one people by another.⁹ However unwittingly, Mohanty echoes the ambivalence toward relativism revealed by Bohannan’s “Shakespeare in the Bush” and Geertz’s “From the Native’s Point of View,” as well as the possibilities interpretive anthropology finds in shifting the ground of the human.

According to Mohanty, “relativism initially becomes a valuable political weapon” against the uncritical appropriation of “the very ideas with which the West has defined its enlightenment and its modernity: Reason, Progress, Civilization” (119):

Opposing the imperial arrogance of the scholar who interprets aspects of other cultures in terms of the inflexible norms and categories of the scholar’s own, the relativist insists on the fundamentally sound idea that individual elements of a given culture must be interpreted in terms of that culture, relative, that is, to that system of meanings and values. The central challenge is to practices of interpretation and unconscious evaluations embedded in them, for relativism teaches us that understandings have historically been tied to political activities, and that “strong” and “meaningful” interpretations have often been acts of discursive domination. Instead, relativism urges care and attentiveness to the specificities of context; it emphasizes the difference between and among us rather than pointing to shared

⁸ The emblematic attack on relativism appears in Norris. For additional reflections on relativism see Jarvie; Laudan; and Krausz.

⁹ In this essay, I refer specifically to Mohanty’s work on anthropology. However, his critique of relativism has taken multiple forms. See especially his *Literary Theory and the Claims of History*.

spaces. What is hoped is that we will, one day, learn to share; that is relativism's utopia. (120-121)

Marshaled against the universalizing and colonizing discourses of the West, cultural relativism represents a radical sensitization to the epistemological complexity of the "other" and the consequent challenges that attend meaningful cross-cultural conversation. In the terms of Bohannan's novel, relativism requires that the interpreter hold his "prejudices" and "principles" "morally in abeyance." What Mohanty calls "sharing," the narrator of *Return to Laughter* calls "tolerance." Even this compromised utopia, however, Mohanty sees as ultimately obstructed by the relativist ethos that defines it. In so doing, Mohanty draws attention to the failures of relativism as it is dramatized in "Shakespeare in the Bush" and "From the Native's Point of View."

In spite of the political lessons cultural relativism has enabled, Mohanty claims that it is "less an idea than a practical and theoretical bias" that leads "to a certain amount of historical simplification and political naiveté" (115). Advancing the notion of the absolute alterity of the "other," Mohanty argues, contemporary cultural relativism has prohibited comparative interpretation and evaluation, separating "us" and "them" into contiguous and equivalent spaces that obviate the very problems and questions relativism was marshaled to contest: the problem of historical domination of one group over another, the question of how to adjudicate the difference between your history and mine. Mohanty thus insists that we cannot afford to allow the matter of what we share as "humans" to go untheorized. What we need, he asserts, is a "positive posthumanist conception of the 'human'" (116). It is not that Mohanty, like so many "anti-relativists," disparages French poststructuralism. Rather, his contention is that the "thoroughgoing deconstruction of 'humanism' and its self-authorizing Subject is . . . first and foremost, a clearing of the ground for a reconsidering of the problems involved" in this project of redefining the human (135). Calling for a "posthumanist" construction of the "human" that emphasizes agency, Mohanty unwittingly echoes the project of interpretive anthropology as articulated by Geertz. For Geertz's objection to relativism is precisely its tendency to render the subject a product of historical or cultural determination. Indeed, with his assertion that culture is relative in both "its essence and expression," Geertz apparently offers the kind of "positive posthuman conception of the human" that Mohanty desires.

Neither Bohannan nor Geertz provide the answers to the questions that Mohanty raises, and it is not my suggestion that turning back to the originary moment of interpretive anthropology will solve current political dilemmas. However, it is precisely the conflicts and compromises, successes and failures that inform interpretive anthropology's disciplinary self-reflection at its constitutive moment that make them such essential reading. Given the affinities of Mohanty's concerns with interpretive anthropology, it is singularly striking that the essay Mohanty devotes to cultural relativism and ethnographic authority manages to skip over it. Indeed, in "Us and Them: On the Philosophical Bases of Political Criticism," Mohanty omits any discussion of the 1960s, the decade in which, as Ortner writes, "a major set of revolutions in anthropological theory" begin (127). Rather, Mohanty chooses to focus on Ernest Gellner's 1951 critique of relativism, which he disparages as "unsophisticated," and Talad Asad's 1986 postmodern embrace of the relativist ethos, which becomes his model for the compromised politics that result from that ethos. Careful attentions to texts like Bohannan's "Shakespeare in the Bush" and Geertz's "From the Native's Point of View" remind us that the endeavor to construct a "posthuman conception of the human" precedes our postmodern moment and begs for a new set of questions.

Between 1965 and 1975, anthropology turns to "Shakespeare" just as it turns to literary theory, specifically to theories identified with the postmodern and the poststructural. I want to suggest that recognizing the full scope of this cross-disciplinary exchange makes possible not only an inquiry into anthropology, but also into the literary theory it adapts for its own ends. For within the context of the postmodern, anthropology's appropriation of "Shakespeare" necessarily brings with it the "authority controversy" Shakespeare embodies in the late twentieth century. So, too, perhaps, anthropology's conflict between relativism, political agency, and a reinvention of the human may also be bound up with the postmodern and poststructural theories that frame it as a persistent problem. Perhaps what anthropology's struggle suggests is that the self-proclaimed anti-humanist agenda of postmodern and poststructural theory may in fact veil a reinvention of a concept of the human as anxiously tested and contested as that of interpretive anthropology. *To be or not to be a humanist?* Perhaps that is not the question at all.

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