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1

Introduction to Critical Ethnography

Theory and Method

Critical ethnography is conventional ethnography with a political purpose.

—Jim Thomas,
Doing Critical Ethnography (1993)

We should not choose between critical theory and ethnography. Instead, we see that researchers are cutting new paths to reinscribing critique in ethnography.

—George Noblit, Susana Y. Flores, & Enrique G. Murillo, Jr., *Post Critical Ethnography: An Introduction* (2004)

Last summer, while attending an annual, local documentary film festival in a small movie theatre with about 80 or more other interested people, I waited with great anticipation for one of the award-winning documentaries to begin. It had been highly recommended by a friend and the festival description was intriguing. From what I could gather, the subject of the film related to women's human rights in Ghana, West Africa. I was very excited about seeing it. I was hoping the film was inspired by the work of indigenous

human rights activists in the developing world, particularly in Ghana, since it is a country for which I have deep affection. I lived there for almost three years conducting field research with local activists on human rights violations against women and girls.

As I waited anxiously for the documentary to start, I began to reflect back on my fieldwork and my days in Ghana working with and learning from Ghanaian human rights activists. I thought of the many sacrifices these people make in working for the victims of human rights abuses in their own country: by providing shelter and protection for them, by enlightening their countrymen and -women on the importance of human rights, and by their own political acumen in helping establish human rights policies. They are truly committed, openly condemning abusive cultural practices while simultaneously advocating for economic and social justice in the developing world. I witnessed so many of them being denigrated and condemned by members of their own communities; however, they forged ahead because of their belief in human dignity and self-determination.

The more I was exposed to the struggles of African men and women working in their own countries for peace, justice, and human rights, the more I realized how their work goes unrecognized by many of us in the West or global North. For many of us, the primary representations we see of developing countries, particularly Africa, are of tribal warfare, corruption, human rights abuses, and those desperately seeking asylum in the West. These representations do not tell the whole truth. The battle these local activists are fighting is one of immense proportions within their own communities that is made more difficult by the forces of global inequities. I remain inspired by the profound importance of their work. I welcomed this documentary as further credit to them.

The film began. A story was unfolding—a story being told by a young Ghanaian woman. My excitement grew. The camera focused on the young woman and shifted intermittently to particular sites in Ghana. As she told her story, she recounted the fear, helplessness, and desperation she felt when confronted by her father's demand that she undergo female circumcision (or what is variously referred to as *female incision*, *female genital mutilation*, or *clitoridectomy*). The portrayal was of a frightened young woman alone in a country where there was no refuge, no one to assist her, and no space of protection and safety. I was beginning to feel uncomfortable; there was something wrong with this story. The documentary came to an end, adapting a tone of hope and opportunity, as the young woman looked into the camera and poignantly expressed that she was finally safe: She had fled the dangers of Ghana. She is now in safe asylum in the United States of America.

The film ended with bold white letters written across the screen revealing the large numbers of women threatened by female incision. It told a tragic,

compelling, beautiful, and well-crafted story of a young woman fleeing a dangerous country where there was no protection from the wrath of her father and the mutilation of her body; moreover, the enormous pain and injustice threatening this woman was all averted in the only option available to her: asylum—the safe haven of the United States.

I began to tremble with rage. The documentary was seriously misleading. It competed with countless other documentaries and it won; therefore, it was given a public viewing before hundreds of people attending the film festival. My blood was boiling. It was a gross and dangerous misrepresentation of Ghana and her people.

During the question-and-answer session, I could not contain my anger over the suggestion that there was no intervention or protection in Ghana for human rights abuses, thereby, erasing the work of human rights activists in that country as though they were non-existent. The filmmaker responded to my comments by stating that female incision occurs in the rural areas of Ghana, far from the city and out of reach from the work of the activists I knew. I sat there in utter disbelief. I had traveled throughout Ghana and know first-hand of the work of activists in the rural area represented in the film. I witnessed their struggles against female incision.

I know the story of Mahmudu Issah, who with his organization of rights activists work in the same area where the woman in the documentary says she found no refuge. Muhamudu and his comrades are struggling with little resources to combat female incision and other human rights abuses at great risk to their lives and livelihoods. They provide safety and protection while making great strides to change the practice. Theirs is a far more compelling story that was absent in the film, leaving the viewer to assume they do not exist.

After it was all over and people were leaving the theatre, the filmmaker came up to me wishing to talk further about the film and the concerns I expressed. She spoke briefly of the region she visited and the woman who told the story. After listening to her speak and sensing her genuine concern around the issue of representation, it was clear to me that she was sincere in her efforts to create a documentary that depicted the experience of this woman and to make a statement about the cruelty of this traditional practice. I believe her intent was sincerely to help this particular woman and to bring attention to a cultural practice that imperils the freedom and well being of women. She was, for all intents and purposes, trying to "do the right thing."

So, why does my discontent with the representation of this woman's story still weigh so heavily on that it occupies the opening pages in a book on ethics, performance, and critical ethnography? It is because with all the good intentions, excellent craftsmanship, and even with the reliability and eloquence of a particular story, representing Others is always going to be a

complicated and contentious undertaking. I believe the documentarian to be ethical; yet the documentary, as with all products of representation, still raises ethical questions. These questions of ethics and representation are obviously not exclusive to this documentary. They arise again and again as I encounter ethnographic and qualitative projects and as I meet artists, researchers, students, and activists engaging the worlds and meanings of Others.

As I continue to think about the documentary, I must also be self-reflexive about my own discontent. After all, the medium was documentary; it was not a book or an article. The documentary does not purport to be ethnography, let alone critical ethnography. So why should I be disturbed? Why should the recounting of this experience occupy the opening pages of this book? The answer is that the film not only documented the lives and stories of real people the filmmaker came to know but also introduced those lives and stories to us. Representation has consequences: How people are represented is how they are treated (Hall, 1997). Whether *claiming* to be ethnography or not, the documentary *was* ethnographic in that the author or interpreter spent time in a location interacting with others within that prescribed space; furthermore, she interpreted and recorded what she found there and then, through her own interpretive standpoint, represented those findings to us. We meet the woman, learned of her experience and her culture through the idiosyncratic lens of the interpreter's interpretation. In this instance, as in most, interpretation held a great deal of power.

I recount the story of the documentary to illustrate what is at stake when you stand in as the transmitter of information and the skilled interpreter in both presenting and representing the lives and stories of others whom you have come to know and with who have given you permission to reveal their stories. This illustration raises a multitude of questions; however, there are five central questions I invite the reader to consider:

1. How do we reflect upon and evaluate our own purpose, intentions, and frames of analysis as researchers?
2. How do we predict consequences or evaluate our own potential to do harm?
3. How do we create and maintain a dialogue of collaboration in our research projects between ourselves and Others?
4. How is the specificity of the local story relevant to the broader meanings and operations of the human condition?
5. How—in what location or through what intervention—will our work make the greatest contribution to equity, freedom, and justice?

These are questions we will engage throughout this book.

A few days after seeing the documentary, I expressed my concern to one of the judges of the festival who chose that particular documentary for viewing. She admonished me for believing that the film further entrenched the "backward view of Africa" and that it erased local human rights activists and their work. "After all," she said, "the film was only fifteen minutes long: There wasn't time to depict human rights. Anyway it is a documentary, and she is a filmmaker, not an anthropologist!" Whether in the form of a film or a book, or whether the recorder is a filmmaker or an anthropologist, or whether an account must be condensed to a paragraph or fills a 300-page monograph, we must still be accountable for the consequences of our representations and the implications of our message, because they matter.

Positionality and Shades Ethnography

Critical ethnography begins with an ethical responsibility to address processes of unfairness or injustice within a particular *lived* domain. By "ethical responsibility," I mean a compelling sense of duty and commitment based on moral principles of human freedom and well –being, and hence a compassion for the suffering of living beings. The conditions for existence within a particular context are not as they *could* be for specific subjects; as a result, the researcher feels a moral obligation to make a contribution toward changing those conditions toward greater freedom and equity. The critical ethnographer also takes us beneath surface appearances, disrupts the *status quo*, and unsettles both neutrality and taken-for-granted assumptions by bringing to light underlying and obscure operations of power and control. Therefore, the critical ethnographer resists domestication and moves from "what is" to "what could be" (Carspecken, 1996; Denzin, 2001; Noblit, Flores, & Murillo, 2004; Thomas, 1993). Because the critical ethnographer is committed to the art and craft of fieldwork, empirical methodologies become the foundation for inquiry, and it is here "on the ground" of Others that the researcher encounters social conditions that become the point of departure for research (Thomas, 1993). We now begin to probe other possibilities that will challenge institutions, regimes of knowledge, and social practices that limit choices, constrain meaning, and denigrate identities and communities.

What does it mean for the critical ethnographer to "resist domestication"? It means that she will use the resources, skills, and privileges available to her to make accessible—to penetrate the borders and break through the confines in defense of—the voices and experiences of subjects whose stories are otherwise restrained and out of reach. This means the critical ethnographer contributes to emancipatory knowledge and discourses of social justice. The

often quoted phrase "Knowledge is power" reflects how narrow perception, limited modes of understanding, and uncritical thinking diminish the capacity to envision alternative life possibilities; domestication will prohibit new forms of addressing conflict, and it will dishonor the foreign and the different. Knowledge is power relative to social justice, because knowledge guides and equips us to identify, name, question, and act against the unjust; consequently, we unsettle another layer of complicity. But, I must now confess: there is something missing with my singular emphasis on politics and the resistance of domestication.

The documentary, reflecting the aims of a critical ethnography project, took a stand against "suffering" and "injustice"—but it was not enough. I found its critique problematic. Therefore, I will argue that critical ethnography must begin to extend its political aims and augment its notion of "domestication" and "politics." Politics alone are incomplete without self-reflection. Critical ethnography must further its goals from simply politics to the politics of positionality. The question becomes, How do we begin to discuss our positionality as ethnographers and as those who represent Others?

Michelle Fine (1994) outlines three positions in qualitative research (p. 17):

1. The *ventriloquist* stance that merely "transmits" information in an effort toward neutrality and is absent of a political or rhetorical stance. The position of the ethnographer aims to be invisible, that is, the "self" strives to be nonexistent in the text.

2. The positionality of *voices* is where the subjects themselves are the focus, and their voices carry forward indigenous meanings and experiences that are in opposition to dominant discourses and practices. The position of the ethnographer is vaguely present but not addressed.

3. The *activism* stance in which the ethnographer takes a clear position in intervening on hegemonic practices and serves as an advocate in exposing the material effects of marginalized locations while offering alternatives.

Fine's outline is similar to the three positions of social inquiry set forth by Jurgen Habermas (1971) when he discusses the (a) *natural science model* of empirical analysis, in which the social world can be measured, predicted, and tested as life phenomena in the natural sciences through the invisible reportage of the researcher; (b) *historical and interpretive model*, in which social phenomena is described and its meanings and functions further elaborated through the balanced commentary and philosophical descriptions of the researcher; and the (c) *critical theory model*, in which social life is represented and analyzed for the political purpose of overcoming social oppression, particularly forms that reflect advanced capitalism through the overt polemics of the researcher. (See also Davis, 1999, p. 61.)

In the examples above, various positions of social science and qualitative researchers are *described;* however, George W. Noblit, Susana Y. Flores, and Enrique G. Murillo, Jr. (2004) take positionality a step further in what they refer to as *postcritical ethnography*. They not only describe positionality, but also comprehensively critique it relative to traditional notions of critical ethnography. Noblit et al. state that much of critical ethnography has been criticized for its focus on social change but lack of focus on the researchers own *positionality*: "Critical ethnographers must explicitly consider how their own acts of studying and representing people and situations are acts of domination even as critical ethnographers reveal the same in what they study" (p. 3).

Positionality is vital because it forces us to acknowledge our own power, privilege, and biases just as we are denouncing the power structures that surround our subjects. A concern for positionality is sometimes understood as "reflexive ethnography": it is a "turning back" on ourselves (Davis, 1999). When we turn back, we are accountable for own research paradigms, our own positions of authority, and our own moral responsibility relative to representation and interpretation. We begin to ask ourselves, What are we going to do with the research and who ultimately will benefit? Who gives us the authority to make claims about where we have been? How will our work make a difference in people's lives? But we might also begin to ask another kind of question: What difference *does* it make when the ethnographer himself comes from a history of colonization and disenfranchisement? Enrique G. Murillo, Jr., describes these identities in his revisioning of the term *mojad*:

> Mojado ethnography is how I have chosen to describe one node along my journey. Mojado (wetback) refers to Mexicans and other Latinos who cross the nation-state territorial border into the United States, and are socially, politically, economically (as well as legally) constructed as "illegal entrants," and "newcomers." . . . Mojado symbolizes the distrust and dislike experienced in *gringolandia,* as *la raza odiada,* "those damn Mexican,"—*extranjeros,* which literally means "outsiders." . . . My experience as an educational ethnographer, to date, can sometimes be described as traveling those blurred boundaries when Other becomes researcher, narrated becomes narrator, translated becomes translator, native becomes anthropologist, and how one emergent and intermittent identity continuously informs the other. (Noblit et al., 2004, p. 166)

Murillo's positionality moves against the objective, neutral observer. Fieldwork research has a very long and early history of scientific empiricism and concern with systematic analysis that is testable, verifiable, and objective without the distraction or impairment of subjectivity, ideology, or emotion. What many early researchers, particularly during the colonial and modern period, did not recognize was that their stalwart "objectivity" was

already subjective in the value-laden classification, meanings, and worldviews they employed and superimposed upon peoples who were different from them. The current emphasis on reflexive ethnography or postcritical ethnography and its critique of objectivity are in sharp contrast to the philosophy of a value-neutral fieldwork methodology that favors the analytic evaluation of the natural science model. But critical ethnography—or what some have called the "new ethnography" (Goodall, 2000)—must not only critique the notion of objectivity, but must also critique the notion of subjectivity as well. More and more ethnographers are heralding the unavoidable and complex factor of subjective inquiry as they simultaneously examine its position. Moreover, the current thinking is not that ethnographers can simply say or do anything they think or feel and pass it off as fact, but rather that they make sure we do not say "is" when we mean "ought"—or as Thomas (1993) writes, "We are simply forbidden to submit value judgments in place of facts or to leap to 'ought' conclusions without a demonstrable cogent theoretical and empirical linkage" (p. 22).

In various dimensions, this was done under the traditional banner of objectivity, when cultures and people were reinvented and redefined to fit inside the biased classifications and philosophical systems of the objective researcher. However, we are now more and more critical of the subjective researcher and how that subjectivity reflects upon its own power position, choices, and effects. This "new" or postcritical ethnography is the move to contextualize our own positionality, thereby making it accessible, transparent, and vulnerable to judgment and evaluation. In this way, we take ethical responsibility for our own subjectivity and political perspective, resisting the trap of gratuitous self-centeredness or of presenting an interpretation as though it has no "self," as though it not accountable for its consequences and effects. Doing fieldwork is a personal experience. Our intuition, senses, and emotions—or what Wallace Bacon (1979) collectively refers to as "felt-sensing"—are powerfully woven into and inseparable from the process. We are inviting an ethics of accountability by taking the chance of being proven wrong (Thomas, 1993).

Dialogue and the Other

As we recognize the vital importance of illuminating the researcher's positionality, we also understand that critical ethnography requires a deep and abiding dialogue with the Other as never before. This means that our attention to ethnographic positionality still must remain grounded in the empirical world of the Other. In fact, it is this concern for the Other that demands we attend seriously to our position as researchers. Ethnographic positionality

is not identical to subjectivity. Subjectivity is certainly within the domain of positionality, but positionality requires that we direct our attention beyond our individual or *subjective* selves. Instead, we attend to how our subjectivity *in relation to the Other* informs and is informed by our engagement and representation of the Other. We are not simply subjects, but we are subjects in dialogue with the Other. We understand that our subjectivity is an inherent part of research, but in critical ethnography it is not my *exclusive* experience—that is autobiography, travel writing, or memoir (or what some people call *autoethnography*). I contend that *critical* ethnography is always a meeting of multiple sides in an encounter with and among the Other(s), one in which there is negotiation and dialogue toward substantial and viable meanings that make a difference in the Other's world.

A more detailed explication of the relationship and dialogue with the Other is further elaborated in the corpus of work by Dwight Conquergood (1982a, 1982b, 1983, 1984, 1986a, 1986b, 1988, 1989, 1991, 1992, 1997, 1998, 2000, 2000a, 2000b). Conquergood frames dialogue as performance and contends that the aim of "dialogical performance" is to bring self and Other together so they may question, debate, and challenge one another. Dialogue is framed as performance to emphasize the living communion of a felt-sensing, embodied interplay and engagement between human beings. For Conquergood, dialogue resists conclusions. It is intensely committed to keeping the meanings between and the conversations with the researcher and the Other open and ongoing. It is a reciprocal giving and receiving rather than a timeless resolve. The dialogical stance is situated in multiple expressions that transgress, collide, and embellish realms of meaning. Dialogue is both difference and unity, both agreement and disagreement, both a separation and a coming together. For Conquergood, ethnographic, performative dialogue is more like a hyphen than a period. Dialogue is therefore the quintessential encounter with the Other.

Moreover, it is through dialogue and meeting with the Other that I am most fully myself. The wonderful paradox in the ethnographic moment of dialogue and Otherness is that communion with an Other brings the self more fully into being and, in doing so, opens you to know the Other more fully. Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) writes,

> I am conscious of myself and become myself only while revealing myself for another, through another, and with the help of another. The most important acts constituting self-consciousness are determined by a relationship toward another consciousness (toward a thou). Separation, dissociation, enclosure within the self as the main reason for the loss of one's self. The very being of man is the deepest communion. . . . To be means to be for another, through the other, for oneself. (p. 287)

It is the dialogic relationship with the Other, this ongoing liveliness and resistance to finality that resists the connotation of timelessness commonly described as "the ethnographic present," that has adversely haunted traditional ethnography. The ethnographic present refers to the representation of a timeless account of the culture or people being studied. Charlotte Aull Davis (1999) states,

> The ethnographer moves on. [But] temporally, spatially and developmentally, the people he or she studied are presented as if suspended in an unchanging and virtually timeless state, as if the ethnographer's description provides all that it is important, or possible, to know about their past and future. (p. 156)

The Other inscribed as a static, unchanging, and enduring imprint in the ethnographic present is dislodged by a dialogic, critical ethnography. Dialogue moves from ethnographic *present* to ethnographic *presence* by opening the passageways for readers and audiences to experience and grasp the partial presence of a temporal conversation constituted by the Other's voice, body, history, and yearnings. This conversation with the Other, brought forth through dialogue, reveals itself as a lively, changing being through time and no longer an artifact captured in the ethnographer's monologue, immobile and forever stagnant.

Note: Brief Historical Overview of Critical Ethnography

The field of ethnography in the United States is primarily influenced by two traditions: the British anthropologist from the 19th century and the Chicago School from the 1960s.

Anthropology and British Functionalism

Anthropology was established as an academic discipline during the middle of the 19th century. In the beginning, the questionnaire was the main method the missionaries, traders, sailors, explorers, and colonial administrators used to obtain data from the population that inhabited their local outposts or stations. The questionnaires were then sent back to the colonial metropolis for the "armchair" ethnologists to interpret (Davis, 1999, p. 60). The most noted work of this period is James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1900).

Toward the end of the century, more ethnologists financed their own expeditions to "far off lands" for the purpose of conducting surveys. These surveys were generally based upon predetermined questions for the interests and benefit of the colonial empire (Davis, 1999, p. 68). The limitations, distortions,

and superficiality of these accounts created a growing unrest and demand for more detail. As a result, in the early years of the 20th century there was a turn toward longer engagements in these locations. This was the foundation for long-term participant observation fieldwork and is associated with the work of Bronislaw Malinowski (1926, 1945) in Britain and Franz Boas (1928, 1931) in America and their students. As Davis (1999) writes about Malinowski and Boas,

> Both had come to recognize the complexity of the so-called primitive and to link this with both an attack on cultural evolutionism and a deep and genuine (if sometime naïve and unreflexive) opposition to ethnocentrism. . . . Both were concerned to recognize and include in their analysis the interconnectedness of each individual society's cultural forms and social structures; in British social anthropology, this came to be expressed theoretically by Radcliff-Brown's structural functionalism; in American anthropology, its fullest expression took the form of an interest in culture complexes. (p. 69)

Structural Functionalism

A. R. Radcliff-Brown's (1958) development of structural functionalism is concerned with defining and determining social structures and the interconnectedness within their own system of structures. It excludes any consideration of external influences; the focus was on the mechanisms that sustain the structure, thereby deeming human behavior as a function of the structures that guide and determines their culture and conduct.

The Chicago School

The Chicago School of ethnography developed in the 1920s in the Department of Social Science and Anthropology at the University of Chicago. Key contributors to the school were Robert Park (1864–1944), who turned the focus of fieldwork to the urban landscape; G. H. Mead (1865–1931) and John Dewey (1859–1932), who emphasized pragmatism; and Herbert Bloomer (1900–1987), proponent of symbolic interactionism. The Chicago School is credited for laying the foundation for "a vibrant and increasingly methodologically sophisticated program of interpretive ethnography" (Thomas, 1993, p. 11).

Positivism

Positivism is based on the idea that empiricism must reach the goal of positive knowledge—that is, prediction, laws of succession and variability.

Positivists believe genuine knowledge is founded by direct experience and that experience is composed of social facts to be determined while reducing any distortion of subjectivity (theology or metaphysics) by the presence of the ethnographer. Therefore, positivism is based on the following assumptions outlined by Norman K. Denzin (2001): (a) There is a reality that can be objectively interpreted; (b) the researcher as a subject must be separate from any representation of the object researched; (c) generalizations about the object of research are "free from situational and temporal constraints: that is, they are universally generalizable" (p. 44) (d) there is a cause and effect for all phenomena—there are "no causes without effects and no effects without causes" (p. 44); and (e) our analyses are objective and "value-free" (p. 44).

Post-Positivism

The post-positive turn—or what is variously referred to as the "performance turn," the "postmodern turn," the "new ethnography," or the "seventh movement" (Denzin, 2001, 2003)—has denounced the tenets of positivism. Positivism's goal for objectivity, prediction, cause/effect, and generalization has been replaced by the recognition and contemplation of subjective human experience, contingencies of truth claims, value-laden inquiry, and local knowledge and vernacular expressions as substantive analytical frameworks.

The Method and Theory Nexus

This book serves as a resource for qualitative researchers who wish to emphasize critical analysis, ethical considerations, and theories and practices of performance. In order to proceed, I must first stress that criticism, ethics, and performance require a level of *theoretical understanding*. Theory becomes a necessity, because it guides the meanings and the vocabulary for each of these three domains. Theory is embedded in their definitions and functions: Critical analysis is grounded in social theory; ethics is grounded in moral philosophy; and, performance is both a practice and a theory. In accepting the significance of theoretical knowledge, it is equally important for us to comprehend the way in which theory is at times the same as method, and at other times distinct from it.

How are theory and method the same and different? They are the same in that theory is used in ethnography as an *interpretive or analytical method*. We often rely on theory—whether it is Marxist theory, critical race theory, or phenomenology—to interpret or illuminate a social phenomenon. However, though theory may guide and inspire us in composing a lay

summary, designing interview questions, or coding data, it is not theory but a methodological process that directs the completion of the task. The relationship between theory and method has a long and provocative history reflected in disciplinary boundaries and research traditions privileging one over the other, as well as defining them as exclusively separate spheres.

The researcher engaged in ethnography, ethics, and performance needs both theory and method.

This tension between theory and method can be addressed by emphasizing what is significant about each as separate spheres and as inseparable entities. According to Joe L. Kinchloe and Peter McLaren (2000), critical theory finds its method in critical ethnography. In this sense, ethnography becomes the "doing"—or, better, the performance—of critical theory. To think of ethnography as *critical theory in action* is an interesting and productive description. The following quotation from Jim Thomas (1993) underscores this point. He refers to critical theory as "intellectual rebellion." The passage is useful because, as it describes the approach of critical theory, it is also describes the aim of critical ethnography:

> The roots of critical thought spread from a long tradition of intellectual rebellion in which rigorous examination of ideas and discourse constituted political challenge. Social critique, by definition, is radical. It implies an evaluative judgment of meaning and method in research, policy, and human activity. Critical thinking implies freedom by recognizing that social existence, including our knowledge of it, is not simply composed of givens imposed on us by powerful and mysterious forces. This recognition leads to the possibility of transcending existing forces. The act of critique implies that by thinking about and acting upon the world, we are able to change both our subjective interpretations and objective conditions. (p. 18)

Critical social theory evolves from a tradition of "intellectual rebellion" that includes radical ideas challenging regimes of power that changed the world. As ethnographers, we employ theory at several levels in our analysis: to articulate and identify hidden forces and ambiguities that operate beneath appearances; to guide judgments and evaluations emanating from our discontent; to direct our attention to the critical expressions within different interpretive communities relative to their unique symbol systems, customs, and codes; to demystify the ubiquity and magnitude of power; to provide insight and inspire acts of justice; and to name and analyze what is intuitively felt.

If, as Kinchloe and McLaren (2000) suggest, critical theory finds its most compelling method in critical ethnography, then we must not only comprehend the necessity of theory but also its *method*. Enrique G. Murillo, Jr. (2004), states,

> Theory is linked to methods, and methods to the scenes studied, grounding one's work. The methods rely heavily on direct observation (participant observation), open-ended interviewing, and textual analysis of human products. However, the degree and extent of utilization of each of these methods depend on the researcher's purposes, the guiding questions, theoretical framework, and the scene itself. (p. 157)

Although theory may fund the guiding principles of our doing, there is a necessary and distinct attention that must be given to the guidelines, techniques, and processes of that doing itself—our method. Theory, when used as a mode of interpretation, *is* a method, yet it can be distinguished from method (and indeed take a back seat to method) when a set of *concrete actions* grounded by a specific scene are required to complete a task. Murillo eloquently reminds us that methods are not simply isolated or immutable activities, but are contingent on our purpose, our fundamental questions, the theories that inform our work, and the scene itself.

* * *

I began the chapter with a story about representation. I will end this chapter by coming back to the story and the central question it raised: How do we represent Others and their world for *just* purposes? We have begun to address the question in this chapter by introducing the themes of *positionality, dialogue, Otherness*, and the *theory/method nexus*.

Summary

- **Positionality.** Positionality is vital because it forces us to acknowledge our own power, privilege, and biases just as we denounce the power structures that surround our subjects. A concern for positionality is a reflexive ethnography; it is a turning back on ourselves. When we turn back on ourselves, we examine our intentions, our methods, and our possible effects. We are accountable for our research paradigms, our authority, and our moral responsibility relative to representation and interpretation.

- **Dialogue/Otherness.** Dialogue emphasizes the living communion of a felt-sensing, embodied interplay and engagement between human beings. Dialogue keeps the meanings between and the conversations with the researcher and the Other open and ongoing. The conversation with the Other that is brought forth through dialogue reveals itself as a lively, changing being through time and no longer an artifact captured in the ethnographer's monologue or written transcript—fixed in time and forever stagnant.

• **Theory/Method.** Critical ethnography becomes the "doing" or the "performance" of critical theory. It is critical theory in action. Theory, when used as a mode of interpretation, is a method, yet it can be distinguished from method (and indeed take a back seat to method) when a set of concrete actions grounded by a specific scene is required to complete a task. We rely on theory—whether it is Marxist theory, critical race theory, or phenomenology—to interpret or illuminate a social action. However, in composing a lay summary, designing interview questions, or coding data, theory may inspire and guide, but it is a methodological process that directs and completes the task.

* * *

In the following chapter, an examination of methods is explored in greater detail. After the methods chapter, a series of hypothetical case studies are presented to illustrate how theory is applied as an interpretive method. Chapter 2 specifically discusses initial methods employed as the researcher enters the field, including such topics as "Starting Where You Are," "Being Part of an Interpretive Community," "The Research Design," "The Lay Summary," "Interviewing and Field Techniques," and "Coding and Logging Data." Chapter 3 comprises three fictional case studies or ethnographic stories that use key concepts from particular theoretical frameworks. Case One includes key concepts from *postcolonial* and *Marxist criticism*; Case Two includes key concepts from *Theories of phenomenology, subjectivity, symbolism,* and *sexuality*; and Case Three includes key concepts from *critical race* and *feminist theory.*

Warm-Ups

1. Take an image—it can be from a photograph, a painting, an advertisement—and speak from the points of view of the various objects or characters within the image. How are they each expressing differently what it means to be within the frame or parameters of the image? How are they expressing their relationship to the other figures or images around them? In your various voicings of what is within the image, are you giving more emphasis to one or more images over others? Why or why not?

2. View the film *Rashomon* or observe a similar story that is constructed from several viewpoints that each tell their side of one story. How does the writer, filmmaker, or teller construct the narrative to give voice to the various characters? What devices are used?

3. Choose a current situation in world events in which two competing sides have been locked in enduring opposition and conflict. Speak from the position of each side with sincere, calm, and thoughtful persuasion and belief. Then, speak as the critical ethnography in an effort to interpret the situation in order to make change.

Suggested Readings

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