

as individuals and as a discipline, refused our embodied complications a field of play in our work and, in so doing, sacrificed—at the least, Geertzian “growth,” and at the most, glimpses of the marvelous and the treacherous suffusing textual, performative, interpersonal and collective communication practice—for the sake of some precarious, because so frantically fortified, inward ease?

Our task, as those who, perhaps, make life complicated for a living, is not the simple liberation of the sexual; commerce did this long ago, and to the extent that the formulation is banality. The task is, rather, to embrace the prospect of eroticizing the social, including the sociality of scholarship, and of finding, in such a prospect, the possibility of remaking the pleasure of knowing a complex world.

The essays in this issue take up the tasks of writing, subverting, making and reading pleasure and desire across a wide range of textual and performative sites. Stephanie Nelson explores tactics for textualizing the pleasures of the erotic, embodied sociality of fieldwork. Laura Severin offers us an analysis of a segment of performance/-ative history, inhabited—as Hayden White posits all histories are—by a “monstrous,” uncanny body and persona deployed by Stevic Smith (233). Dale Cyphert maps the pleasure and cultural pedagogy etched onto a(n also Whitean ‘monstrous’?) motorized picnic table. Robert Asen reads the photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe through the tropes of the allegory and the nude. And Craig Gingrich-Philbrook concludes with an analysis of the embodied sociality of consumption, empirical and rhetorical, in the solo performances of Rae C. Wright. In the best sense, each essay complicates both its methodological task and its respective site and, in so doing, adds generative complication to performance studies as well.

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Intersections of Eros and Ethnography

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This paper argues that making love is a form of shared cultural knowledge, and explores how researcher-authors might speak and write about this shared knowing. Specifically, it examines how knowledge may be generated, and subsequently represented, when a researcher and informant have a sexual encounter in the context of fieldwork. Exemplars, fiction and nonfiction, are examined as possible strategies for representing this shared knowledge. Keywords: ethnography, sexuality, anthropology

Introduction

The world doesn't fear a new idea. It can pigeon-hole any idea. . . The world fears a new experience more than it fears anything.

—D.H. Lawrence “The Spirit of Place” (7)

I have a confession to make. I haven't been blurring my genres. For many years now I've been researching and performing the music of another culture, the Ewe-speaking people of West Africa. I work to understand how the Ewe people use music and how meanings are made from it, but there is a problem. Music, in Ewe culture as well as in most cultures, is a tool of courtship. And sometimes when I'm in the field, diligently doing nothing more than what I should be doing—singing, dancing, asking, listening, puzzling, coping—sometimes music works its particular magic on me too. How am I to explain what happens next? Where to fit that into my journals and ethnographies? What is this music for, and just how do I know, anyway? For many years I have also been writing fiction about these other ways of knowing and these other experiences in the field.

Meyee nam loo, edevima	Bring that one here
Meyee nam loo, edevima	Bring that one here
Edevima ko lena, bezo bezlo ko	The girl with a neck like a deer
Mikple ma melia ga deka giloo.	That I may lie down with her.

Ewe Atsia song (Ladzekpo, trans.)

I want to begin a conversation here about something that is rarely talked about outside of the lyrics of the songs themselves—something that we who make a profession of observing and writing about Others seem to prefer leaving to psychologists, movie producers, preachers, and rock stars. What I explore here is not what *kind* of learning and knowing, or what *kind* of communication is going on when we make love, since I believe we know already that it *is* communication and thus it doesn't need to be defended as such here. What I do want to explore is how we might speak about these ways of communication as shared cultural knowledge, and find words to write about the ways that our bodies make love and knowledge and culture together.

I'm not the only one, of course, who's been sleeping with some of the people I profess to study. There are ethnographers of popular culture who are not only talking about sex, but doing it in the field with abandon. Tom Wolfe has been writing about it for years, following in the footsteps of Jack Kerouac and others. And of course romance seems to be a necessary ingredient of many documentaries. If and when Hollywood gets around to making a film about Margaret Mead's fieldwork in Samoa, it is likely that if the Samoans aren't doing it in living technicolor on the big screen, Mead surely will be. Yet somehow the intersection of eros and ethnography has remained taboo in many academic fields that employ ethnography as textual praxis.¹ This undiscussability of the erotic in ethnographic texts apparently extends to the field of performance studies, as the remarkable castigations of Corey's and Nakayama's "Sextext" (*TPQ*, 17.1 1997) on the CRTNET Internet bulletin board have made amply evident.

Yet as Clifford Geertz has remarked, "anthropologists don't study villages, they study *in* villages" (22). We are bodies in fields, and it seems to me that if we truly care about and are open to the other bodies we encounter in those fields, then sometimes what happens between us may be sexual, or at least charged with the energy of such possibilities. I think it's unrealistic to pretend that it doesn't happen, in part because it's been going on for a long time, and also because we miss out on an important way of knowing if we refuse to acknowledge what we learn from sex in the field, or marginalize it to conference hall gossip. We can catalogue and categorize the minutiae of cultures to our heart's content, but after all, as James Hillman has remarked, the world is made less of nouns than of verbs. "It doesn't consist merely in objects and things; it is filled with useful, playful, and intriguing opportunities" (*The Soul's Code* 86). From all I have heard and experienced, opportunities for sexual encounters are part and parcel of fieldwork.

When the drummers and dancers go home, when the lights and the lanterns and the fires go out in the cities and towns and villages, where we spend the night (or where we long to) is arguably as much a part of the research experience as anything we do by day. To believe that these pleasures and desires are extraneous to the knowledge we are seeking as professionals is to forget what Foucault and others have taught us: our pleasures are also our politics—they are the sites of our power/knowledge relationships with Others. Perhaps they too are in need of excavation and acknowledgment, in the sense that to acknowledge means to credit where one's claims to knowledge arose from.

Anthropology has long taken the sexual practices of the Other as its object of scrutiny, just as fiction writers have routinely undertaken examination of the sexual

practices of their own cultures. In this paper I explore how both fiction writers and ethnographers have written about romantic encounters and culture simultaneously. As mentioned earlier, when I feel inspired to write about the more personal ways of knowing an Other, I have done so within the genre of fiction. I've come across several other ethnographers who do the same (or something close to it) and I'll re-inscribe a few of their words here. There are also a few who are beginning to talk about sex in the field within the ethnographic genre, and I will reproduce some of their words as well. First, however, let me anticipate some objections to eroticizing our ethnographies.

The Problems

We must not think that by saying yes to sex, one says no to power.

Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* 157

To which we may add, another advantage to the African woman, that her feelings, like those of barbarians and the uncivilized generally, are by no means so highly developed as among Europeans. A scanty diet, a life of toil, and the petty cares of domestic duties, blunt, if they do not destroy, the sexual appetite.

From the journals of Sir Richard Burton, in *The Erotic Traveller*, Edward Leigh, ed. 142

First, some background about my motivations. I initially began writing this article after returning from my third field trip to West Africa, where I was studying women's musical organizations. As had happened on the previous two occasions, I became romantically involved during that summer in the field, this time with a Togolaise medical student who was home for the summer from his training in Europe. It had been a joyous relationship—one not designed to last, but encouraged by the community nonetheless. Now, I realize that we were very much in the same place in our lives (both students on leave from our pursuits of advanced professional degrees), that we held similar values, and that we saw the world not all that differently. I recall sitting with him at sidestreet cafes on numerous charcoal-scented evenings, unpacking in his stilted English and my abominable French and Ewe our shared views about Marxist political economy and women's reproductive issues. What we shared most fundamentally perhaps (besides our promising futures), was a deep love of music. We danced as much as we could afford to in Lome's worldbeat nightclubs, or on the rooftop of his house in leaner times. I have never danced so well with anyone as I did with him, and the memory of that summer remains hauntingly sweet. We corresponded for about a year or so, until he married a German woman and went to do his medical internship there. I have since lost touch.

More recently, while completing two years of fieldwork on a controversial utopian organization for my doctoral dissertation (*Synanon Women's Narratives: A Bakhtinian Ethnography*), I became romantically involved with the community's appointed philosopher. Our relationship fulfilled both his need to sort through his relationship to the failed community with someone who would listen, and my passionate desire to understand what fueled the remarkable commitment of Synanon's members to a radical alternative lifestyle. I would not have felt the heartbeat of his community, nor achieved the depth of understanding about what had been won and lost, without our erotic relationship. Ultimately, his commitment to living a communal lifestyle was as entrenched as is mine to autonomy and privacy, and so we parted.

Both times, I came from the field thinking about the richness of my erotic encounters, perplexed about the kind of knowledge of the Other that romantic knowledge is or could be. What I struggled with most immediately was how to write these issues into my ethnographies. So I set out to see what other researchers in the field had written about such encounters. My original paper was a rather naïve celebration of the possibilities and potentials of such unions, even in instances when their participants share less of a worldview and are unevenly positioned instrumentally, as was the case with many of the relationships described in the literature I reviewed. One such relationship of radical alterity and power relations was that of anthropologist Kenneth Good and his Yanomama child-bride Yarima. I originally ended my paper with the following review of Good's book, *Into the Heart*. I offer this except from my original work as a cautionary tale that points out the inherent problems of authoring from a professional stance one's intersections with personal emotions and ethnography.

"[Y]ou come here all the time to visit us and live with us. . . I've been thinking . . . that you should have a wife. . . Take Yarima. You like her. She's your wife." (Good with Chanoff 120-121)

Yarima had become exceedingly dear to me, almost like a daughter, yet not like a daughter. It wasn't something I understood completely. Nothing in my life had prepared me to understand it. Yet there it was, a feeling as deep as anything I had ever experienced, a feeling, I knew, that was very, very Yanomama. (12)

*Like Margaret Mead 65 years before, Kenneth Good chose to write his ethnography for popular audiences. He had also written a powerful and nearly impossible love story. It is worth noting that in the subtitle to Good's book, *One Man's Pursuit of Love and Knowledge*, love comes before knowledge. This is a dangerously political juxtaposition for anthropology, and such implications resurfaced for me when I read a recent indictment by two Brazilian anthropologists that the renowned characterizations of the Yanomama as "fierce" and warloving by reigning Yanomama "expert anthropologist" Napoleon Chagnon have further encouraged Brazilian government policies of domination and suppression of them (see Asch). Good's ethnography will do much to re-shape attitudes about the Yanomama, as well as introduce many non-academics to the political plights of these people and their lands.*

Good spent 12 years in Venezuela among the Yanomama people. He accepted the gift of a child-bride, Yarima, as a politically correct gesture (young girls are often given to men as tokens of male solidarity), and had no intention of taking this young girl, whom he knew well and was quite fond of, as a mate. But gradually over many years, the relationship deepened and shifted into conjugal love. It was then that the problems began—problems that centered on the fact that Good was not a permanent part of Yarima's life and culture.

"I am coming back. I am coming back." . . . I pointed to Yarima. "No one is to touch her. No one is to touch her! No one!" I could feel the anger coming over me. Pacing up and down, I threw my arms around, slamming myself hard on the sides and back with my open palm, punctuating the words. "She has been given to me! She is my wife!" Slam! "I have never touched any of your wives." Slam! "You do not touch my wife! You do not touch my wife! You do not touch my wife!" (143)

Strong words do not last long in a culture where any unprotected woman is routinely raped, and Yarima paid dearly every time her husband left the field. Eventually she agreed to the only choice she had if she wanted to remain Good's wife—learning to wear shoes and clothing and becoming a professor's wife in New Jersey. How this choice becomes reality is the focus of the book.

"Do you like me?" I ask her. "Do you want to be married to me?" These are not questions Yanomama ask of each other. Marriage is marriage. No one asks if the other person likes them or wants to be married. They are ludicrous questions. . . "Okay," she said, stopping suddenly and looking me straight in the eye, "now you go home. Now it's time for you to go back to your village. Go back to Pennsibaniateri." My heart leapt, as if jolted by electricity. But when I look at her lips she was smiling, and when she saw the expression on my face, she started to giggle. Some joke. A Yanomama joke. She picked up some sticks, put them in her nose and lips, and turned to me. "Do I look good?" she asked. "Yes," I said, "You look good." (196-197)

*The question might arise as to whether Good has written a traditionally "useful" ethnography—one that details the mindsets and life patterns of a people, or whether he has simply written a love story. But this is indeed powerful ethnography. We come to know through Good's emotional responses, fueled by deep and intimate commitment, how the Yanomama live and what they think about their lives and what they are willing to fight for. Importantly, Good challenges Chagnon's interpretation of the Yanomama as "the fierce people" (*Yanomomo: The Fierce People*). Good effectively undermines Chagnon's anthropological authority with just a few telling anecdotes about Chagnon's unsavory field and professional tactics (see especially 26-58).*

One of the nicest things about Good's book is that Yarima's voice is also in it. This is how she describes her wedding, just days after arriving in the States and only a week before the birth of their son.

Then Kenny told me that the pata asked if I wanted him to be my husband, if I would be his wife even if he became sick, and even if he became old, even until we both died. I said, "Tell the pata that I am your wife. Tell him that even if you cannot leave our hammock, I will go down to the river and get you water. I will harvest plantains and roast them for you on the fire. Tell the pata that I will gather fruit and honey for you. I will cook your meat. I will care for you and do all these things even when you are very old. Even then I will be your wife." (333)

The end of Good's book seems to read happily ever after, but ironically, my initial description of Good's love odyssey as "nearly impossible" was prescient. Several years after Good's book was published, Yarima became disenchanted with the life of an urban American college professor's wife and returned home to the rain forest with her three children. Good hired a lawyer and successfully sued for child custody, claiming that Yarima would likely betroth his eldest daughter at an early age (just as she had been betrothed to him). Currently, there are a number of anthropologists who are upset with Good and this infelicitous turn of events, claiming, among other things, that he is subjecting Yarima to a double standard.

I hope I have demonstrated above that there are numerous precarious issues regarding sex in the field (or sex anywhere, for that matter) awaiting all who would stray their way. I want only to stake out a small clearing in this dark and thorny forest. While I will pay some of these issues their due before willfully bracketing them, what I want to make clear at the outset is that this is not a monograph about whether or not we should sleep with our informants. Ultimately, that is a highly personal and highly contextual decision. What I do want to explore are the choices that arise after it has happened—specifically, whether or not, and how, we might write about it.

Most dangerously perhaps, sex in the field can raise issues of inequality. I acknowledge wholeheartedly that there are real issues of power in the field—sexual desire and its satisfaction being just one of them. These issues have certainly been present for me in West Africa, where many men want to meet and mate me because

they see dollar signs in my eyes or other opportunities for personal advancement. I acknowledge too that there is other meta-bracketing going on; e.g., whether the researcher is male or female, or engages in hetero- or homosexual practices, will greatly impact the reception of the relationship in the field and within the Academy. For instance, a man in the field may feel less free than a woman researcher to write about his sexual encounters because he may be more readily accused of being exploitative.

There are other issues: of morals, of personal ethics, of impropriety within the norms of the host culture, of control of one's self or the Other. Then there is the litany of critical inquiry issues: Who gets to write about sex and love? Whose pleasures, values, and knowledges are privileged and whose are left on the margins? As feminist musicologist Susan McClary has remarked, "[s]truggles over musical propriety are themselves political struggles over whose music, whose images of pleasure or beauty, whose rules of order shall prevail" (28). The same holds true for struggles over sexual propriety, and these contests are often more highly charged. While I have no easy answers to the issues raised by choosing to write our love lives into our professional discourses, I would like to point out that writing about our intimate experiences raises our own personal stakes in our claims to knowledge. Our texts take personal risks, and at their best blur the boundaries between public and private, self and Other, mind and body, knowledge and desire—boundaries that are currently under siege as troublesome barriers in Western academic thought. I am not making claims for what some have called "the cult of true love" as a more legitimate or deeper form of truth than other ways of knowing. Indeed, some of the sexual relationships described below, including my own, might arguably be described as "shallow" and brief by ethnographic fieldwork standards, and claims to cultural knowledge garnered by them might be suspect as well (see El-Or). Further, writing openly about what is considered a private matter in most cultures risks turning representation of the Other toward depersonalization and commoditization.

Ultimately, sexuality is socially constructed, and sexual decency presupposes social decency, including representational decency. Problems abound in social and sexual arenas in this culture as well as in others, problems that require a continuing rethinking and remaking of "the general life conditions under which our sexuality comes into play" (Schur 202). This acknowledged, perhaps by writing about our intimate relationships we can help to link knowing to caring and shift disinterested scrutiny to responsible engagement.

To re-iterate, my principal task here is to explore possibilities for writing love and sex into ethnographic ways of knowing, so I will now move away from problematizing, adding only that some of these issues will surface again in the stories and ethnographies I investigate.

The Possibilities

Lore has it that the philosopher William James once dreamt that he had discovered the key to the universe. He roused himself from the dream to write down its message, and when he awoke he found he had written the following words:

Higamous, hogamous
 Women are monogamous
 Hogamous, higamous
 Men are polygamous.

While the secrets of the universe may more likely be keyed to physics than biology, since Claude Levi-Strauss at least, sexual transactions have been considered the cornerstone of culture. It was Levi-Strauss who posited that human culture began with the incest taboo, when men determined it was less socially profitable to keep their daughters for themselves than to form alliances with other men by trading female offspring. As far as my own fieldwork is concerned, William James' clerihew does indeed seem a key to understanding the cultural conflicts and musical messages of much of the Ewe women's music I study (see Nelson and Ladzekpo).

Man, man, you are the cause of your own problems.
 Is any wife better than the mother of your child?

Aiyeye, Togo Habobo song, *ibid*

I argue in my dissertation that the goal of ethnographic inquiry should be to engender appreciation of difference rather than to achieve hermeneutical understanding (i.e., shared meanings). Shared experiences and communal feelings are possible without shared understandings, and can be more instrumental for invoking cooperation and promoting change (see Eisenberg "Jamming: Transcendence through Organizing"). These are the kinds of experiences that music and lovemaking can evoke so well; these are also the sites of praxis where fine lines are drawn between domination and co-optation, or friendship and caring—boundaries that post-colonial ethnographers struggle these days to negotiate in their aim to produce texts that remain legitimate without impoverishing or decomposing the Other. As James Clifford puts it, the "predicament of post-colonial ethnography" is that "[s]ome authorizing fiction of 'authentic encounter,' in Geertz's phrase, seems a prerequisite for intensive research; but initiatory claims to speak as a knowledgeable insider revealing essential cultural truths are not longer credible" (*The Predicament of Culture* 90). For Geertz, the problem is simply a literary one. He claims that "the difficulty is that the oddity of constructing texts ostensibly scientific out of experiences broadly biographical, which is after all what ethnographers do, is thoroughly obscured" (*Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author* 9–10). But interpretation is not simply a problem of genre. It is, as Edward Said has remarked, "a politics" (135). I believe that post-colonial ethnographers still need to challenge the central claims of hermeneutics, i.e., Hans Georg Gadamer's tenet that to understand is to agree on worldviews—to "fuse horizons" (see *Truth and Method*).

For there are times when we cannot understand, but when it is desirable nonetheless to walk in another's shoes for awhile. "We come to Sodji's shoes" says an Ewe women's processional song performed in honor of a deceased group member (Nelson and Ladzekpo). This is an embodied knowledge—a knowledge tied to caring, appreciation, and acceptance without shared meanings. It is the kind of knowledge that music and sex impart, for it evokes pleasures and creates possibilities that can engender a sense of community while remaining ambiguous enough to encompass difference (see Eisenberg). I am suggesting that some of these embodied ways of knowing have been woefully under-articulated within the ethnographic canon.

What has been inscribed on American bodies representing the various American

