

BOOK REVIEW

Applegarth: Rhetoric in American Anthropology

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Risa Applegarth, *Rhetoric in American Anthropology*

Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2014

Pp. xii+267

ISBN10: 0822962950

ISBN13: 9780822962953

Price: €28,09

Anthropology has historically had a reputation as a “welcoming science” that, from its earliest organizing efforts, attracted a higher proportion of women and people of color than other disciplines. The primary method of knowledge production in the discipline, ethnographic observation, has a “profound” or “mundane” availability that, at its most basic, does not necessitate special equipment or complex measurement techniques, and the discipline’s overall epistemological project of giving a complete account of human history is inherently democratic and inclusive. However, the professionalization of anthropology in the United States in the early twentieth century was characterized by the constitution of increasingly restrictive boundaries between “amateur” and “professional” work that limited entry through requirements of stringent training and qualifications, placed emphasis on specialization and insularity, and restricted the rhetorical flexibility of and access to the ethnographic monograph. In this professionalization, women and racial minorities were increasingly marginalized: even when they were able to obtain restricted professional certifications, publication contracts, and research grants, they rarely obtained permanent professional and faculty positions. Compounded with this, anthropology has also had profound ties to colonialism. In the U.S. this is especially evident in the ways anthropology claimed intellectual jurisdiction and authority over the interpretation of Native American and African American communities and in the discipline’s contributions to governmental mapping and collecting projects, which mutually solidified government surveillance and control and anthropology’s claims to professional scientific status.

The central argument of Risa Applegarth’s intriguing study is that despite this marginalization and inequality in the early professional history of anthropology, which she traces in the introduction, women and people of color developed novel, alternative genres of publication that allowed them to claim the epistemic and rhetorical resources of anthropology while also developing critical, alternative anthropological knowledge that challenged foundational assumptions of the discipline’s exclusions and claims to objectivity. In addition to drawing upon work in science studies, Applegarth’s study engages with the “new genre studies” in scholarship on rhetoric and composition, in which “genre” is conceptualized as a flexible constellation of regulated but improvisational

strategies that writers adapt to their needs in order to achieve rhetorical social actions, rather than as fixed and formal rules of composition. Genres are constraining but also productive sites where community boundaries and norms may be defined and where a variety of collective actions may be coordinated; and thus, genres connect rhetorical activity with relations of power by “disciplining” or “normalizing” actors in ways that reflect and shape social relationships. Individual texts never perfectly enact social norms, and writers can combine or adapt rhetorical strategies across genres, which makes an examination of genre a particularly productive focus to reveal discursive and epistemic tensions and innovations. As a side note, Applegarth also points out that scholars in rhetoric and composition studies have recently taken a particular interest in employing ethnography in their own research, because of its promise as an interpretive and generative process of research into rhetoric.

In chapter one, Applegarth examines the “ethnographic monograph” as the “privileged genre” for the production and presentation of anthropological knowledge. In particular, she argues that the variations in the genre (length, extent of interpretation, qualifications of authorship, target audiences, and especially the ways fieldwork is textually described) were restricted as part of a collective process of demarcating scientific from non-scientific practices. In the 1920s and 1930s, in particular, writers developed rhetorical and epistemological representations of the “scientific rationale” of fieldwork that excluded or deemphasized gender and racial inequalities, personal and embodied relationships, and historical location in ongoing cultural dynamics that characterize the ethnographic encounter.

In response to this increasingly restrictive genre, women and people of color in the United States developed short-lived alternatives in the 1920s and 1930s, which Applegarth examines in chapters two, three, and four of the book. The first alternative Applegarth identifies is the “ethnographic” or “field autobiography,” exemplified by Ann Axtell Morris’s 1931 *Digging in Yucatan* and 1933 *Digging in the Southwest* and Gladys Reichard’s 1934 *Spider Woman*. Unlike traditional autobiographies, which tend to emphasize family and personal history, these narratives relate the author’s personal experiences of undertaking field research, and thus focus almost exclusively on periods in the field. This form of narrative draws rhetorical resources from technical monographs by its presentation of specialized anthropological knowledge and its focus on the rigors of field research, allowing the authors to represent themselves as competent anthropological researchers, but it also renders the practice of that research emphatically personal and gendered by foregrounding the identity and embodied presence of the researcher. Claims are grounded in “embodied authority” instead of by relating impersonal “objective” findings that minimize the representation of the researcher’s presence in the text. The narratives of these ethnographic autobiographies follow the actual embodied movements of researching as a process of discovery, registering sensory and emotional responses, and showing how the researcher learns by negotiating practical social situations and training her body over time. These authors also narrate the various disruptions and often-restrictive material circumstances that impose themselves upon the researcher, but which are typically elided in technical monographs. Morris’s and Reichard’s studies work to educate audiences about the methods and practices of study, actively “recruiting” the readers rather than withholding insider information, and they represent fieldwork as a domain offering adventure, intellectual stimulation, and freedom of activity (“gendered pleasures” otherwise limited for women). In these and other ways, the ethnographic autobiography presents an alternative to the systematic exclusiveness of professional ethnographic monographs and its typical presentation of knowledge as authoritative, finalized, and impersonal.

The second alternative genre is the “folklore collection” assembled by “native ethnographers,” exemplified by Ella Cara Deloria’s 1932 *Dakota Texts* and Zora Neale Hurston’s 1935 *Mules and Men*. The status of both of these women as members of the communities they studied presented tensions for the ways they participated in and observed those communities and blurred distinctions between their status as subjects and objects of anthropological knowledge. As insiders, their detailed knowledge of cultural practices was valuable in anthropology, but they were also critical of the abstraction, decontextualization, and static depiction of cultural practices that characterized collections of folklore compiled by other anthropologists. Instead of grounding their knowledge in this objectifying epistemology, Deloria and Hurston represented their specific relationships and experiences in the communities they studied. Their studies demonstrated the ways community members challenged their claims and actively participated in the production of knowledge, and thus disrupted the epistemological authority that anthropology claimed over the interpretation of community practices. These authors also emphasized the communal contexts in which folklore was produced, and they showed the vibrant uses folklore had in the ongoing lives of dynamic communities. This strongly contrasted with the typical “elegiac” anthropological narrative that sought to preserve “authentic” native stories before they supposedly-inevitably disappeared. Deloria and Hurston did not abstract folklore texts by characterizing them as generalized “types” for collation and comparison, but attributed them to particular authors, communities, and contexts. And like the field autobiographies discussed above, they introduced themselves into the narrative and highlighted the overtly racialized and gendered positions they occupied in their communities, and by implication in the scientific community.

The third alternative, discussed more directly by reference to Gladys Reichard’s 1939 *Dezba, Woman of the Desert* and nearly a dozen other exemplars, was the “ethnographic novel.” These works sought to depict accurate ethnographic knowledge of communities through the device of a fictional narrative. Reichard and others drew from the features of the genre of literary novels, which allowed them to humanize the psychology of native people by displaying the motivations and emotional attachments of their characters, to address the complex relationship between individual choices and social forces by narrating characters with different but intersecting trajectories over time, and to comment on and criticize government policies and challenge the finality of anthropological authority by highlighting multiple, competing voices within the text. A particularly popular topic of these ethnographic novels was the experiences of Native Americans with government-sponsored boarding schools intended to assimilate native youths to the dominant white American culture. The narratives of these ethnographic novels often highlighted the multi-faceted and ambivalent relationship people had with these schools, and exposed their often-harsh practices and fundamentally problematic and dubious results for native communities.

Rather than rejecting scientific discourse, the writers of these various alternative genres sought to draw upon the epistemic and social prestige of science for more diverse and inclusive ends. These innovative, deviant genres were short-lived and the authors were marginalized from the centers of the discipline’s institutional power, so it is perhaps not surprising that they were subjected to “historical erasure” from the record of anthropology. However, Applegarth notes that they are self-reflexive in a number of surprising ways, and that their recovery may hold insights for contemporary attempts to develop critical ethnographic knowledge in anthropology and other disciplines. Applegarth’s study makes major contributions both to the recovery of these fascinating texts and to the study of rhetorical and epistemological strategies of depicting knowledge in these and other texts.



Applegarth concludes the book by laying out a case for a kind of research that she calls “rhetorical archaeology.” Genres, in this view, are “material traces” in which researchers may decode the “epistemic negotiations” of academic disciplines, which are otherwise so difficult to reconstruct in historical retrospect. Writers exercise rhetorical agency in producing texts through the ways they repeat, subvert, establish, or destabilize the rhetorical possibilities of genres, and they thus also shape what other writers in turn view as possible or effective ways to act. Tensions and alternatives that are otherwise submerged in a discipline become visible in these traces, and a discipline’s knowledge can be examined as contested and negotiated, incomplete and developing over time by the ways rhetorical strategies are enacted in texts. Such an approach can interpret the relative “position” and “sequence” of rhetorical actors to help understand their relative success in shaping the discipline, just as archaeology uses these notions to interpret material artifacts. For Applegarth, this archaeological metaphor contrasts strongly with evolutionary metaphors for professional and scientific progress by conceptualizing the agency of historical actors as well as the interpretive work to recover the traces of those actions.