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FEELING HISTORICAL

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Twenty five years after *Writing Culture*. What was that moment? Where are we now? The conjunctures. And a story to connect them.

Telling history in *medias res*, historicizing while standing on the historical banana peel. One thing is certain: you will be proven wrong, or at best, passé.

I'd like to say, from the start, that I'm uncomfortable with statements like: "*Writing Culture* transformed ethnography" (the conference flyer) or: "*Writing Culture* was a game changer" (the Dean's introduction just now). Transformations were occurring. Games were changing. But *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986) was part of the changes, not their cause—however avant-garde we may have felt at the time.

Writing Culture registered, very imperfectly, what now seem to have been historic forces for change: anticolonial and feminist, to mention only the two that I stressed in my introduction. There were plenty of others. The book's gaps, its "exclusions," have been amply explored: race, class, gender, sexuality. And where is visual culture? What about film—so important in the reconfiguration of ethnographic practice? Isaac Julien's *Territories* was screened in 1984, the year of the Santa Fe seminar. And Faye Ginsburg recently reminded me of Jean Rouch, a neglected inspiration. Where are technology, communications media—structuring forces that today loom so large?

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2 The fact that the book was widely read, that it was debated, and made sense
3 in contexts beyond anthropology, at least shows its embeddedness in the historical
4 moment. Its originality? At best, you get to be six months ahead of the zeitgeist.

5 This is how our project looks to me a quarter-century later. The retrospection
6 I offer today is very much a song of experience, not of innocence. My own writing
7 (I won't speak for the others) now seems innocent in its tone of confident, knowing
8 critique—a voice so irritating to many of *Writing Culture's* detractors.

9 Today I feel embarrassed by that voice. And I also wish I could reclaim some
10 of its confidence . . .

11 Let me begin again, with another return to *Writing Culture*, a recent French
12 translation of my introduction, “Vérités partielles, vérités partiels” (2011). The
13 translation, with a preface, was the work of a doctoral candidate I've never met:
14 Emir Mahieddin. I was asked for a short afterword. I'll use it as the starting point
15 for my expanded reflections here.

16 Reading one's own words in translation is always an experience of estrange-
17 ment. One sees, hears, oneself from a distance—another person in a different
18 time. And of course any translation, however faithful, is something new, a perfor-
19 mance for unimagined audiences. What could *Writing Culture* possibly mean, what
20 work might it do, for French readers (or for any readers) in 2011? In his astute
21 introduction Emir Mahieddin suggests that *Writing Culture* and, more importantly,
22 the intense debates that followed its appearance 25 years ago, have attained a kind
23 of “classic” status. No longer a success de scandale, the book can perhaps be read
24 for what it actually says.

25 In the United States, when “postmodernism” was so urgently resisted, the
26 barbarians at the gates were associated with “French theory.” Simultaneously, in
27 France, “le postmodernisme Américain” was being held at arms length. But of
28 course the zeitgeist didn't respect national borders. Many of the trends associated
29 with “postmodernism” had their own French trajectories in the work of Jean
30 Jamin, Jeanne Favret-Saada, Jean Bazin, Marc Augé, and Alban Bensa, to name just
31 a few prominent anthropological examples. I might also mention Bruno Latour
32 and François Hartog. The interdisciplinary openness of *l'Homme* under Jamin's
33 editorship seems very much in the critical, experimental spirit of *Writing Culture*.
34 And yet, as Mahieddin notes, there has been resistance, a sustained suspicion of
35 intellectual movements that were pervasive across the Atlantic and the English
36 Channel: cultural studies, feminist theory, various neo-Marxisms, critical studies
37 of race and ethnicity. Ten years ago, a quick trip on the Eurostar from London to
38 Paris took one into a different intellectual universe. In the bookstores, where were

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2 the topics that filled the British shelves? Where was race? Gender? Deconstruction?
3 One looked in vain for Stuart Hall, Fredric Jameson, Donna Haraway, Paul Gilroy,
4 Judith Butler, or their local equivalents. Today the situation seems to be changing,
5 the general attitude less insular, certainly among younger scholars. Perhaps *Writing*
6 *Culture* will have its delayed moment in France. Perhaps.

7 * * *

8 As I read *Writing Culture*—my own words especially—I feel most profoundly
9 their historicity, their distance. They belong to another world. There is no entry
10 for *globalization* in the book's index. No *Internet*, no *neoliberal*, no *postcolonial*. A
11 *wiki*? For us, back then, it might have been some kind of *djinn* or spirit! Writing
12 was, well, writing—a matter of pen and paper. Today it's not hard to imagine the
13 cover photograph of *Writing Culture* with Stephen Tyler furiously texting, and his
14 bemused “informant” absorbed in a cell-phone call.

15 So much has changed in these 25 years. How can the changes be understood?
16 What historical narratives make sense of them? In retrospect, I have come to
17 believe that a profound shift of power relations and discursive locations was going
18 on, and still is. Call it, for short, the decentering of the West. The discipline of
19 anthropology has been an inextricable part of this decentering, and so have its
20 critiques, books like *Writing Culture*. I hasten to add that *decentering* doesn't mean
21 abolition, defeat, disappearance, or transcendence of “the West”—that still-potent
22 zone of power. But a change, uneven and incomplete, has been underway. The
23 ground has shifted under our feet.

24 A conversation from the early 1970s comes to mind. I was a doctoral student
25 doing research work at the London School of Economics in the Malinowski papers,
26 and one day outside the library I found myself chatting about the history of his
27 discipline with Raymond Firth, the great anthropologist of Tikopia. Firth had
28 been a student and colleague of Malinowski. He shook his head over attempts to
29 connect anthropological research with colonial power, in particular the important
30 book edited by Talal Asad, *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* (1973). Without
31 minimizing the issue, Firth thought the relations between anthropology and empire
32 were more complex than some of the critics were suggesting. He shook his head
33 in a mixture of pretended and real confusion. What happened? “Not so long ago
34 we were radicals. We thought of ourselves as gadflies and reformers, advocates for
35 the value of indigenous cultures, defenders of our people. Now, all of a sudden,
36 we're handmaidens of empire!”

37 This is what it's like to feel historical. The marking of colonialism as a “period”
38 (a span of time with a possible ending) came suddenly to Euro-American liberal

2 scholars, at least those who noticed the changes. Who would have predicted in the
3 early 1950s that within a decade most of the colonies ruled by France and Britain
4 would be formally independent? Feeling historical can be like a rug pulled out: a
5 gestalt change perhaps, or a sense of sudden relocation, of being seen from some
6 previously hidden perspective. For Euro-American anthropology, the experience
7 of a hostile identification as a Western science, a purveyor of partial truths, has
8 been a troubling, alienating, but ultimately enriching process. The same learning
9 opportunity challenged many scholars of my generation with respect to gender and
10 race.

11 In retrospect, I locate *Writing Culture*'s intervention within a larger, postwar
12 narrative of political and cultural shifts. To explain the changes and the perspective
13 I bring to them I will need to explore my personal experience, like Firth's, of being
14 repositioned. The relevant slice of history just happens to coincide with my own
15 lifetime. Perhaps the critics who insisted that postmodern reflexivity could only
16 lead to solipsism were right after all!

17 * * *

18
19 Born in 1945, I grew up in New York City and Vermont. This was the peace
20 of the victors: the Cold War standoff and a sustained, U.S.-led, economic boom.
21 My fundamental sense of reality—what actually existed and was possible—would
22 be formed in circumstances of unprecedented material prosperity and security.
23 Of course, my generation experienced recurring fears of nuclear annihilation. But
24 because disarmament was not around the corner, we learned, on a daily basis, to
25 live with “the balance of terror.” In other respects, the world seemed stable and
26 expansive, at least for white, middle-class North Americans. We would never lack
27 resources. Wars were fought elsewhere. The lines of geopolitical antagonism were
28 clearly drawn, manageable.

29 New York City during the 1950s felt like the center of the world. North
30 American power and influence was concentrated in downtown Manhattan. A sub-
31 way ride took you to the United Nations, Wall Street, the Museum of Modern
32 Art, or avant-garde Greenwich Village. The dramatic decolonizing movements
33 of the postwar period arrived belatedly in the form of civil rights, the Vietnam
34 debacle, and a growing receptiveness to cultural alternatives. My critical think-
35 ing would be nurtured by radical art and the politics of diversity. Its sources
36 were dada and surrealism, cross-cultural anthropology, music, and popular cul-
37 ture. New historical actors—women, excluded racial and social groups—were
38 making claims for justice and recognition. I saw academic work as inseparable

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2 from wider challenges to societal norms and cultural authority. The moment
3 brought a new openness in intellectual, political, and cultural life. To mention
4 only the U.S. university, the ethnocentric, male-dominated English department
5 of the 1950s now seems like a kind of bad dream. The moment also produced
6 exclusivist identity politics, hedonistic subcultures, and forms of managed mul-
7 ticulturalism. The language of diversity could mask persistent inequalities. My
8 own writing never escaped the liberal pretense of “making space” for marginal
9 perspectives. Yet despite these limitations, the politics of cultural critique, of ex-
10 perimentation and inclusion were serious responses to an ongoing, irreversible
11 displacement.

12 When I was 33, I moved from the North Atlantic to the edge of the Pacific,
13 from one global ocean and world-center to another. For a time, I was a diasporic
14 New Yorker, living out on a periphery, the West Coast. But little by little the
15 presence of Asia, the long history of North–South movements in the Americas, and
16 influences from culturally rich Island Pacific worlds made themselves felt. I was
17 living in a decentered, dynamic world of contacts. The whole idea of the West, as
18 a kind of historical headquarters, stopped making sense.

19 Moreover, in Northern California I could clearly see that the decentering at
20 work was not just an outcome of postwar decolonizing energies and contestations
21 during the global 1960s. These forces had made, and were still making, a difference.
22 But the shift was also the work of newly flexible and mobile forms of capitalism. I
23 was caught up in two unfinished, postwar historical forces working in tension and
24 synergy: decolonization and globalization. Santa Cruz, California, my home after
25 1978, epitomized this doubleness. A 1960s enclave of countercultural, antiauthority
26 visionaries, the town was also a bedroom community for the high-tech world of
27 Silicon Valley. This was the “Pacific Rim” of massive capital flows, Asian Tigers,
28 and labor migrations. I also lived on a “frontera,” a place in the uncontrolled,
29 expanding borderland linking Latin America with the United States and Canada. In
30 the northern half of Santa Cruz County: a university and town government strongly
31 identified with multicultural, feminist, environmentalist, anti-imperial agendas. In
32 the southern half of the county: a population of Mexican and Latino immigrant
33 workers, a long history of labor struggles, and the growing power of agribusiness.
34 I began to think of the present historical moment as a contradictory, inescapably
35 ambivalent, conjuncture: simultaneously post- and neocolonial. My writing in
36 the 1990s grappled with this recognition that the energies of decolonization and
37 globalization were historically entangled—sometimes tightly, sometimes loosely
38 or in struggle.

2 California felt less like the U.S. “West Coast” and more like a crossing
3 of multiple unfinished histories. My book *Routes* (1997) reflects this sense of
4 dislocation. Its final chapter, “Fort Ross Meditation,” took me north to Alaska and
5 another *frontera* region, Beringia. Fort Ross, just up the coast from San Francisco,
6 was an outpost of the Russian fur-trading empire, its labor force composed of Aleut
7 (or “Alutiiq” as they now call themselves) sea otter hunters. I would follow the
8 legacy of these mobile natives in contemporary Alaskan identity politics. (This is
9 in my current book: *Returns*.) The Fort Ross contact zone also led me to a deeper
10 concern with the histories of indigenous California, a topic I’ve pursued though the
11 open-ended story of “Ishi,” the state’s most famous Indian. Teaching in Santa Cruz
12 also opened contacts with South Asia and the Island Pacific through the graduate
13 students who studied in the University of California, Santa Cruz’s interdisciplinary
14 history of consciousness program. Academic travelers, they identified themselves as
15 “post-colonial” or “indigenous.” Some would remain to teach in the United States;
16 others went home. Circulation and contact continues. These younger scholars’ clear
17 sense of working within—while resisting and looking beyond—a Euro-American
18 world of ideas and institutions intensified my own sense of being displaced, a
19 “late-Western” subject. I also felt myself recruited to their projects.

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22 A deepened awareness of geopolitical (dis)location empowers and limits my
23 historical perspective in ways I can only begin to grasp. Developments after 2000 are
24 even less susceptible to narration than the post-1960s decades. It is impossible to say
25 with certainty what comes next. A few things, at least, seem evident: The United
26 States, newly vulnerable, is no longer an uncontested global leader. Its military surge
27 following 9/11 proved unsustainable—a spasmodic reaction to secular, irreversible
28 changes. There will doubtless be further adventures, but U.S. global hegemony
29 is no longer a credible project. It is countered economically by Asia and Europe;
30 by Islam as only the most visible among non-Western globalizing ideologies; by
31 resistance to neoliberalism in Latin America and elsewhere; by financial instability
32 and uncontrollable markets; by the volatile, uneven spread of predatory forms of
33 capitalist accumulation; by rising inequality, scarcity, and instability worldwide;
34 by deepening ecological limits and competition for resources; and by the internal
35 fragmentation and fiscal emergency of more and more nation states. The signs of
36 systemic crisis and transition are everywhere—crisis without resolution, transition
37 without destination. In the 1980s, Margaret Thatcher could famously declare:
38 “TINA: There Is No Alternative.” In the early 1990s, Francis Fukayama, with a

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2 straight face, announced “The End of History.” Today everyone knows there are
3 many alternatives, for better and worse.

4 Where does *Writing Culture* fit in this history that I’ve been painting with a
5 broom? Conceived in the early 1980s, it can be understood as either a “late 1960s”
6 or an “early 1990s” work. The book’s critical energy, its reforming zeal, and its
7 sense of (neo)colonization as the principal locus of power relations, signal a 1960s
8 genealogy. But one need only contrast it with a precursor, Del Hymes’s influential
9 collection from 1969, *Reinventing Anthropology*, to see the changes. *Writing Culture* is
10 distinctly post-1960s in style and emphasis, especially in its concern with discursive
11 determination, its assumption that forms of representation actively constitute
12 subjects in relations of power. The world it expresses is more that of Foucault than
13 of Fanon. Or perhaps I should say more late-Foucault than early Fanon.

14 As the 1960s waned and neoliberalism took hold, visions of revolution were
15 replaced by cultural and intellectual tactics of subversion or critique. By the 1980s,
16 frontal resistance to a mobile and inventive hegemony seemed useless. We were
17 in a Gramscian “war of position.” What could not be overthrown might at least
18 be undermined, transgressed, opened up. For many intellectuals working inside
19 Euro-American centers of power this meant supporting “diversity” in both episte-
20 mological and sociocultural registers. Space could be cleared for discrepant senses
21 of the real, positions could be staked out for struggles that could only be imagined.
22 Dominant forms of authority and common sense could be criticized, theoretic-
23 ally disassembled. *Writing Culture*, with its rejection of monological authority and
24 commitment to experimentation, made sense in this conjuncture.

25 I see *Writing Culture* as occupying a transitional moment—late 1960s–early
26 1990s—in the larger history of the last half-century. And I understand this post-
27 war history as the interaction of two distinct but entwined historical processes:
28 decolonization and globalization. Neither process is linear or guaranteed. Both
29 are contradictory and open-ended. Both have worked to decenter the West, to
30 “provincialize Europe,” in Dipesh Chakrabarty’s words. This is an unfinished but
31 irreversible project. Decolonization and globalization have been historically linked
32 during the last 60 years, but their roots are different, and so may be their futures.
33 *Writing Culture* reacted—with insight and blindness—to profound shifts in global
34 culture and society. It is very much a work of its time. Yet it seems to be having
35 a second life in the present conjuncture. Experiments in ethnography abound, as
36 Kim Fortun makes clear in her visionary preface to a recent “relaunch” of the book
37 by the University of California Press. What new uses are being found for the critical
38 tools in this book from a former world? On verra ça . . .

* * *

Rereading *Writing Culture*, I'm struck by how much less "historical" we felt back then. The book does not float in metacritique, as some critics have claimed. It is very much oriented toward practice. But its explicit historicizing seems relatively thin. One encounters talk of the "world system" (more or less in Immanuel Wallerstein's terms). And the power of colonial legacies shows up a lot (in chapters by Renato Rosaldo, Mary Pratt, Talal Asad, and me). George Marcus grapples directly with political economy—with the ethnographic problem of representing "the system." Writing on Paul Willis, he notes, a bit wistfully, that at least Marxists can assume a fully worked out, recognizable theory of the whole. For Marcus, however, large-scale political-economic-cultural articulations, pose a genuine problem of representation—a problem now more acute than ever.

Paul Rabinow attempts to historicize the book's undertaking from a place of critique on the edge of its regime of truth. He finds symptoms of "postmodernism," relying on an early version of Fredric Jameson's influential work on the cultural logic of capitalism's latest stage. This historical perspective, to be developed by Jameson and, later, David Harvey, was only just emerging, and it was still quite ethnocentric—grounded in Europe and North America with little sense of different historicities or even of global governmentality. (In this latter arena Rabinow, like the rest of us, would soon be on a rapid learning curve.)

Michael M. J. Fischer's contribution grapples with historical emergence. He surveys diverse forms of ethnic autobiography, taking the pulse of what had not yet come to be called "identity politics." The "postmodern arts of memory" he invokes as models for reflexive ethnographic writing take decidedly post-1960s forms: nonessentialist, relational, "inter-referential." Far from a vision of containment, or taxonomic multiculturalism, Fischer discovers uncontrollable energy, a spilling out of categories. *Postmodern*, in his usage, denotes sites of invention and excess. Yet he still feels able to round it all up in a generalizing, authoritative way, a mode that would get him into trouble with ethnically identified critics.

A good deal of *Writing Culture* now seems like the "critique" Bruno Latour thinks has painted itself into corners (2004). We often operate within ready-made diagnostics of power: colonial, institutional, hegemonic. Overall, the book's contributors show little sense of their epistemological embeddedness, their precarious historicity. Looking back at my own writing, I notice the certainty of its uncertainty, its confident critical tone. Partial truths are picked apart. But there are, in the book, few "situated observers," as Renato Rosaldo would later name the

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2 displaced social scientist. There is “provincialization” of the West, to be sure . . .
3 but only up to a point. Our province remained the decentered center of the world.
4 No doubt Michel-Rolph Trouillot saw something like this when he wrote about
5 the “timidity” of *Writing Culture*’s critiques.

6 For us, feeling displaced was exciting, not scary. Perhaps this best sums up
7 the distance I feel, today, from the book’s conjuncture.

8 Let me say another few words about “decolonization” and “globalization,”
9 from my shaky perch in the new millennium. I’ve said that the historical changes
10 I’ve lived through are aligned by these two historical forces.

11 “Globalization” is not, or not simply, “the capitalist world system.” It is of
12 course capitalist . . . and more. I hold onto the much-abused word as a sign of excess,
13 a name for the evolving world of connectivities we can’t represent. Globalization
14 in this sense is obviously not the 1990s version—“the end of history,” “the flat
15 earth.” Nor is it the universal enemy—Jose Bové tilting against MacDonalds, the
16 Battle of Seattle. Globalization is the multidirectional, unrepresentable sum of
17 “material/semiotic” relations (as Donna Haraway might put it). It’s not simply a
18 continuation of imperial dominion by other, more flexible, means, as critics on
19 the Left are likely to observe. It’s more than that. You can’t say imperialism from
20 below, but you can say globalization from below, or from the edge. *Globalization*,
21 for me, is a place-holding name for an articulated, polycentric totality. Multiple
22 zeitgeists. A bush, or tangle, of historicities.

23 Likewise for *decolonization*. This denotes a historical process, not an event—
24 not the national liberations of the 1950s and 1960s that were initially successful,
25 then co-opted. Decolonization names a recurring history—blocked, diverted,
26 continually reinvented. The energies once bundled in phrases like “the Third
27 World,” or “national liberation,” are still with us. They reemerge in unexpected
28 sites and forms: “indigeneity” (all those people once destined to disappear . . .),
29 “The Arab Spring” (whatever that turns out to be . . .).

30 There is something genuinely hopeful in the surprises that history can be
31 counted on to deliver. We can certainly take heart from the failures of the dominant
32 systems we resisted (and became, in the process dependent on). We can be grateful
33 for the inability of hegemonic common sense to subsume alternatives, to round
34 up, to account for, everyone. What new identities, alliances, social struggles, and
35 modes of conviviality are emerging?

36 This hopeful, or at least exciting, feeling of historical possibility is inseparable,
37 at least for me, from another emotion, something I didn’t experience 25 years
38 ago: the visceral awareness of a “given” world suddenly gone. The ground shifting,

2 for better and for worse. Serious questions about our grandchildren's future . . .
3 Feeling historical.

4 This is not about terror. The terrorist, a scapegoat, is a symptomatic conden-
5 sation of instabilities that are deep and world changing.

6 The vulnerability to political violence and economic insecurity that many of
7 us feel today is intensified by ecological threats that can no longer be managed or
8 exported. What happens when the supplies run out, when the resource wars get
9 really desperate? Of course this feeling of exposure is a version of what most people
10 in the world have always known.

11 The certainty of having lived in a "First World" bubble of security that is no
12 more. Good riddance to that. And now?

13 Twenty-five years after *Writing Culture*: the excitement, the fear, of being in
14 the real.

15
16 **ABSTRACT**

17 *An experiment in "self-historicizing," this personal article looks back on Writing Culture*
18 *after 25 years. It asks how these years can be narrated historically. It locates the*
19 *book with reference to postwar experiences of decolonization and globalization, and*
20 *specifically in a transitional moment between the radical 1960s and the neoliberal*
21 *1990s. [historicizing, decolonization, globalization, the West, displacement]*

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