

# Reflections

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Glen Ellen, California

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Dear Gerry,

I'm terribly sorry about having to bail out of the festschrift for you. It is entirely my own fault; I have failed to listen to advice given to me by nearly every one of my Berkeley mentors, at one time or another: when they come at you with anything that even remotely looks like academic administrative work—run like hell. If it weren't that other folk's jobs are sort of hanging in the balance, I would have told the President to go hang; haven't really owed the guy much since the strike, two years ago, anyway. But there you have it; what was all that about frontstage and backstage behaviors? The older I get, the more brazen the gate-crashers who make their way into the dressing room. Now there's a conundrum: how come it's *increasing* age that brings 'em after you, in this Goffmanesque version, compared to the opposite, in real theater?

I'm really glad to hear you're taking off for new horizons, and I was honored beyond measure to even get an invitation to participate in the big party, celebrating the event. I was a bit unsettled to find myself the only archaeologist among the ranks, when the final roster came out: good lord, you drank enough beer with us; surely there were more of us archy-type students who found their way into your classes? Where'd we all go? In any event, thank you for the companionship you gave us during my time at Berkeley. In my memory, you were the only socio/cultural kind of faculty person who really hung out with us, in the manner of our tribe. We noticed. We thought you were good company.

I was even more unnerved to find they'd ditched the last category for submissions: social interaction. That was what I sent my form in under, because after all, that was the course I took from you. I supposed I'd fit just as well or better under "Other Voices," but by the time I found out about the decision, I'd worked up this whole, huge, Berkeleysque theoretical premise about how that theoretical framework had influenced my work. The scary part was, it was all true. Then they took the label off the bottle. Now what?

Well, hell. I suppose the best thing to do is just tell you the story. Don't worry; it's not particularly postmodern in its narrative stance. To be honest, between you and Jim Deetz, you pretty much ruined me for postmodernism, at least, as it played out in archaeological circles. This narrative is probably not so much self-reflexive as it is self-indulgent, and in the narrative structure of my 8-year-old daughter's book reports, you'll have to wait till you read the book yourself, to find out the ending. But I couldn't let the opportunity go by, without making a stab at explaining the long-term consequences that taking "Social Interactionist Theory" have had for me.

I've been trying to find my actual class notes, but I can't. So I think it was in 1981 that I took the course, but it could have been fall of 1980. The circumstances weren't the best: all the incoming archaeology grad students had just been booted out of the graduate anthropology core course (by Burton Benedict himself, as I remember, although he was always very apologetic about it, afterwards), because after all, it was required for all the socio-cultural students, but only Deetz had sent his archy students in, as gate-crashers. That year there was a big incoming class, and we were the scraggly bit hanging over the top. We all got up, at the first-day-of-class announcement, and trooped out, heads hung low. We regrouped down in Deetz's office, then still down in the Lowie. Jim basically told us that if we weren't going to do the core course, we were going to do something else in socio-cultural anthro: we weren't there to become archaeologists, we were there to become anthropologists who happened to "do" archaeology. I was particularly mulish about this. I was only newly brought to anthropology, and then only by Deetz's work: I'd been a historian in training, and before that, and writer (until I discovered that all the great Southern writers were either drunk, or dead, or both. And besides, I couldn't really write). Who, exactly, was I supposed to go take a course with, and why, for god's sake?? That was when Jim said to me (in exasperation, as was often the case, with us), "Well, hell, anybody who goes through Berkeley and doesn't take a course from Gerry Berreman is a damn fool."

So I ended up in "Social Interaction." I wish I could claim some greater, higher motivation, but I cannot. I was driven there at the end of a sharp, pokey stick. Thank goodness. Because you were not only my first real anthro course, you were my first real theory course. And even more importantly, you were the first (and one of the very, very few) of my Berkeley profs to show me how to knit together the various disparate bits of where I had come from, what I had learned so far, and where I might be able to go. I've never forgotten that. But I've also never had the opportunity to explain it to you.

For starters, I just hated everything about theory. It seemed elitist, remote from everyday practice (no pun intended), and hopelessly incomprehensible. It made me self-conscious about my hillbilly roots (because I thought that was why I didn't understand the lingo), and it made me feel even more out of place than I already did as

an easterner in the west, a rural person in the city, and an archaeologist amongst ethnographers. Culture shock was about the only basic concept I understood, but that one I got, to the bone. At the time I was taking your class, I was writing these drippingly sarcastic papers for Jim, entitled things like "The Structural Functionalism of the Snake-Oil Man" (god bless him, he decided to keep me around, anyway), and I was so miserably homesick and out of place that I would literally get claustrophobia from all the people walking down Telegraph, and would have to jump into an open shop door and hide in the clothes racks, shivering, till it passed.

Along about midterms, things began to change. I got your midterm for class, and just completely came unglued at the prospect. In a sheer panic, I called my baby sister, back home (she who gifted me with the dictum, "Just remember: we was poor, and we was white, but we was *never* trash") for advice. Lucille was training to be an editor, and she counceled, "Honey, just tell him a story. We all like stories." So I did. I told you about the time I transgressed and violated some heretofore unknown gender taboos in an Appalachian living room, sometime in my early adolescence, and got myself rapped upside of the head with a wooden cooking spoon for my troubles. It worked. Or, at least, you passed me. And in the meantime, you also pointed out, very gently, that a) the narrative I'd spun out wasn't all that different from that stuff called "ethnography," and b) maybe, just maybe, this stuff called anthropology wasn't so alien, after all. Maybe someone who'd spent a lifetime on the outside, looking in, would have a bit of a knack for it, after all.

After that, I actually began to pay attention. I was transfixed by Goffman, found Garfinkle dangerously impolite but educational, and had to read Berger and Luckman three times, just to hold my own. I still own the copies. What drew me was, I'm afraid, not any deep theoretical congruence, but the fact that real people danced and dawdled through their pages. As someone relatively new even to anthropology, I was entranced by Jim's structurally flavored, but really instinctually defined powers of the mind to create meaning, and then impart them to material things. But, but, but: in the world I'd grown up in, the rural becoming suburban, '60s Civil Rights, socially transformative, history-bound, class-defined, slippery as a fresh tomato seed South, I'm sorry: you could impart all the meaning you wanted to, but that didn't mean it would stay put where you left it. Taking your class not only gave me the imagery and the mechanisms to let meaning loose in social dynamics, without fear, it confirmed my inclination that other, more "text" based metaphors for knowing sense were, indeed, flat, one-dimensional, and linear. Maybe, just maybe, building houses works like a nice linear text. Living in them never did, never can, and never will. Schultz's, and then Goffman's, stage sets worked so much better, I thought. I wasn't just meaning. It was meaning in action, out on the street, that mattered. Like fresh fish and cooked okra, social interaction was supposed to be slippery, in spite of, or maybe because of, all the rules.

And that's where I went, and how I have pursued my own research, ever since. It's been one heck of a bizarre route, but never a dull one. It was also an embarrassingly covert action, I'll admit: I can't think of a single professional paper in which I ever cited *Presentation of Self*. But it's amazing how much that reading has shaped what I've done. In the lingo of the time, it gave me permission to do some pretty interesting things, albeit not always those sorts of things that all my colleagues agreed with. For instance, it chimed nicely with the dictum that that roving band of Western folklorists Jim apprenticed me to always insisted on: do nothing at all before you talk to the folks. Keep talking the whole time, and ask them what they think when you're done. Until about 1995, talking to people was pretty taboo stuff for archaeologists, unless you called it "ethnoarchaeology," and I always agreed with Jim that that sounded like something you could probably be indicted for in some states. And it left me with an inescapable predilection for the folks standing at the edge of the stage, in the halflight; I do the archaeology of transients, of people who used the land but never owned it, of drifters, tenant farmers, squatters, and beachcombers. And I "excavate" their strategies of persistence, subversion, compliance, and ultimate success. I am perpetually called too data-oriented by the theorists, and too theoretical by the particularists. And I chose a career that puts me in a classroom for the vast majority of my time, because I find I can only learn what I teach. I really, really like what I do. But today, I wanted to be able to tell you that you shifted my track in profound ways, with your willingness to ignore my ignorance, and let me come to the realizations on my own. I have enough experience now, myself, to know that you took your teaching very seriously, and yet with great art and grace, never let that show. Thank you. Hope we do you proud.

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