

# Book Review: Taking Our Informants Seriously

David Young and Jean-Guy Goulet. *Being Changed By Cross-Cultural Encounters: The Anthropology of Extraordinary Experience*. Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1994, 378 pp.

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For the past fifteen years or so, anthropologists have engaged in debates examining the place as well as the construction of the subject in the ethnographic project. Various positions have taken guises such as postmodernism, interpretive and reflexive anthropology, and anthropological poetics. Regardless of the outcomes of these debates, one can in the least acknowledge their contribution to the anthropological project; they have persuaded us to re-examine where anthropology has come from—and where it is going. The exploitative nature of field relations having been thoroughly revealed to us, we have been forced to examine our personal epistemological constructions. Is this only ‘navel gazing,’ as some anthropologists argue (eg. Polier and Roseberry, 1989)? Not always. Nevertheless, simply cataloguing our biases (personal and epistemological) won’t take us far. What we are slowly coming to terms with is that our cross cultural encounters might be tools for better understanding our own personal and cultural ‘realities.’ Seriously entertaining the notion that self and Other are two aspects of the same reality requires seriously considering what our cultural counterparts have to say. It is in this respect that Young’s and Goulet’s *Being Changed* offers an insightful perspective, one which is uncluttered by anthropological jargon, and one which refuses to be caught up in the ‘post’ critical debates.

As a first step... anthropologists can begin to take their informants seriously and to entertain the idea that an informant’s account may be more than a “text” to be analyzed. It may have something of value to contribute to our understanding of reality (Young and Goulet:12).

This edited compilation is comprised of eleven essays which are divided into four subsections. The book attempts to do three things. First, it provides accounts of anthropologists who have had extraordinary experiences, or have chosen to seriously consider extraordinary accounts experienced by their informants. Next, it works toward the establishment of a theoretical framework through which extraordinary experiences might be explained. Finally, it explores the issue of what we are to make of extraordinary experiences. These do not neatly fit western scientific notions and therefore might readily be met with skepticism. How might they be conveyed to an audience which is predisposed to a rationalized conception of 'scientific thinking?' There is no easy answer to this question. Nevertheless, we can begin this project by seriously considering the extraordinary experiences as reported by our informants.

The first section: "Extraordinary Experience and Fieldwork," includes contributions by Jean-Guy Goulet, Marie Françoise Guedon, and Edith Turner. Goulet's essay is entitled "Dreams and Visions in Other Lifeworlds" and in it he documents his experiences from fieldwork among the Dene Tha of Northern Alberta and the Guajiro of South America. He begins with Geertz's assertion that "we cannot live other people's lives, and it is a piece of bad faith to try," but disagrees with his stipulation that we "can but listen to what, in words, in images, in actions, [others] say about their lives" (25). Can we go beyond the limitations that Geertz sees for us? Goulet believes that we can, that it is possible to experience the world of the cultural Other to a certain degree. He recalls an experience he had while on fieldwork among the Dene Tha of Chateh in Northern Alberta where he was sitting with some elders about a fire in a teepee. The smoke was becoming heavy and was irritating his eyes when he suddenly found himself staring at a life-sized image of himself fanning the fire with his hat. A moment later in the 'real' world, a non-Native arose and began blowing on the fire. At this point, he was instructed to stop this immediately, since such actions would "offend spiritual entities and induce a violent windstorm in the camp" (30). The proper way of fanning a fire was by the use of a hat or some other object. Goulet explains how he envisioned the proper way of conduct among the Dene Tha—the proper way of fanning a fire, without having had any prior knowledge of the subject. His approach to understanding foreign cosmologies entails an acknowledgment that the reality of the cultural Other is nothing but a transformation of his own western reality:

I understand a people among whom dreams are readily talked about and interpreted when I can relate to them in such a way that their dreams make reasonable sense to me, as mine to them, precisely because they exhibit similar contents or images, are amenable to similar kinds of interpretations, or are seen locally as consistent with the expected consequences of ritual actions (18).

Citing Rappaport, he argues that empiricism and rationality are incompatible with many of the experiences associated with the world of visions, dreams, and religion, and that 'good ethnography' should encourage us to challenge our own rationalized assumptions.

Marie Françoise Guedon's "Dene Ways and the Ethnographer's Culture" demonstrates how she "could not learn about Dene ways of life and language without [herself] growing into this learning" (41). For Guedon, not only did her field experience result in personal transformation, but it also forced her to question the adequacy and cross-cultural validity of western conceptualizations. This is demonstrated in her discussion about western conceptualizations of culture and how these clashed with those of the Natives. Western anthropologists tend to emphasize technology and material conditions when defining a foreign culture and assessing the extent of cultural change (49). For the Dene, technology does not appear as a part of 'culture' (47) since what they might consider as culture is processual, and involves personal knowledge, stories, myths and dreams, and territorial locales associated with these. Believing that anthropological theory should reflect the thought world of those we study as well as our academic traditions (62), Guedon concludes that "The manner in which I tell and use a story will say as much about my participation in the Dene Ways (my Dene identity) as the story itself" (61). She seems to be looking for a medium. As far as culture is concerned, she learns that it "becomes what can be transmitted through stories" (62). She likes Sapir's 1924 definition of culture "not as knowledge, nor as manner, but as life" (63).

The final essay in this section is contributed by Edith Turner, and she tells of her extraordinary experience of witnessing the emergence of the *ihamba* (tooth) spirit from the body of an ill-stricken Native while on fieldwork in Zambia in 1985. Had she not been able to abandon her western conceptualizations, she believes that she might otherwise have seen this experience as fraud or trickery. Turner does this in a manner which we have come to expect from her—with a narrative voice, arguing that what often

appears to be shamanic trickery really is not (89). She gives examples of shamanic healing, such as that presented in the film *Sucking Doctor*, where the shaman is seen as sucking an intrusive power from various bodies. Western skeptics often merely state that the object, which the shaman "sucks" into his mouth was merely secreted there prior to the healing. Turner's chapter, "A Visible Spirit Form in Zambia" provides another view. She argues that an informed understanding of shamanism will easily account for these misguided perceptions and explanations.

The next section of essays is entitled "Modeling Extraordinary Experience." It contains contributions from Charles Laughlin, Rab Wilkie, and David Young. Laughlin's essay is entitled "Psychic Energy and Transpersonal Experience: A biogenetic structural account of the Tibetan Dumo Yoga Practice." Here, he describes how mystical and yogic traditions are based on models which involve the movement of energy in the body, and he provides a personal account of his experiences. These are explained in biopsychological terms (100). He advocates a transpersonal approach to understanding such mystical experiences. This approach allows for "participant comprehension," which "requires that more emphasis be placed upon participation, than upon more passive observation... participation requires 'suspension of disbelief'" (102). Laughlin draws on Gellhorn's theory of autonomic-somatic integration (1967) to explain the experiences occurring in altered states of consciousness which involve "higher experiences of psychic energy" (118). The result is an explanation of how the ergotropic system (which "subverses... the physiological components of our adaptive strategies to desirable or noxious stimuli in the environment" (118)) works with the trophotropic system ("responsible for regulating all the vegetative functions, such as reconstruction of growth cells, digestion..." (119)) in both a complementary and antagonistic manner in order to achieve bodily homeostasis. With this, Laughlin attempts to find a middle ground between emics and etics: "Indeed it is my belief that anthropological science derives from applying etic methods and explanations of human activities to the fullest possible range of emic data" (102).

Young's essay "Visitors in the Night: A Creative Energy Model of Spontaneous Visions" provides a contrast to Laughlin's work. It is not as scientifically descriptive, though it posits a framework which does justice to the views of the cultural Other without forsaking the integrity of 'science' (see Introduction). Young points out that when informants report having had visions, anthropologists have in the past accepted this as data, attempting to

explain it using some type of analytic framework in order to demonstrate how this experience fits into the greater cultural theme (167). On the other hand, when the anthropologist is subjected to such extraordinary experiences, he/she often ends up disregarding it as inappropriate data. Young describes two of his own visions, which appear to have taken forms analogous with the two belief systems most familiar to him, Zen Buddhism and Native North American religion. Here, he illustrates his three-stage Creative Energy Model. The model should allow for the serious consideration and explanation of extraordinary experiences that would otherwise be dubbed simply as 'unscientific' and therefore non-empirical. In a nutshell, Young is advocating an "as if" approach to understanding our cultural Others and taking what they have to report seriously. He argues that suspending disbelief requires adopting the attitude that extraordinary accounts heard in the field could in fact be true, should be approached "as if" they were, and are therefore worthy of serious consideration. He concludes: "It is time that we as anthropologists begin to take our informants more seriously and attempt to build models that will do justice to our own scientific world view... and the world view of those who see reality in a different way" (191). This does not mean that testable scientific hypotheses are a necessary component to scientific validity.

Rab Wilkie's essay "Spirited Imagination: Ways of Approaching the Shaman's World" deals with the question "What happens when we open ourselves to others, specifically those who are at home in a world that to us seems strange?" (139). This is addressed through the documentation of a roundtable discussion which occurred in Edmonton, Alberta. Two central discussions are presented: one deals with an extraordinary encounter which one of the discussants had experienced, the other is a reaction of the various informants to a guided visualization. Reactions range from skepticism to valid acknowledgment of the extraordinary experiences, and the point of the essay becomes a lesson in suspending rationalized disbelief. Though a guided visualization might seem contrived, it can certainly lead to the spirit world if we let it, as one of the discussants points out. For Wilkie, anthropologists as human beings have the capacity to be changed by "opening ourselves" to new experiences, though what this 'change' constitutes depends on who we are (158).

The third section of the book is entitled "Taking Our Informants Seriously," and contains essays by C. Roderick Wilson, Lise Swartz, and Antonia Mills. Wilson is concerned for anthropologists that "failing to change our normal ways of perceiving, we see not what they, our informants

and the people we work with, are seeing" (198). In his essay "Seeing They See Not," he recalls his own fieldwork among the Waorani in Amazonian Ecuador to demonstrate that even our perception of colour is bounded by western normalized conceptions. His title is from a biblical passage, Matthew 13, and it implies that because we cannot allow ourselves new perceptions, we do not see what is before us (206). Wilson gives examples which have, in fact, changed him. He is concerned "about the fact that my vision is so 'normalized' that I could not see what was literally in front of my face" (99) and provides suggestions, sometimes similar to Young's, as to how we can avoid perceptual barriers and seriously consider non-conventional cultural assumptions and experiences.

Lise Swartz's eponymous essay, "Being Changed by Cross-Cultural Encounters" discusses how her life at sea was changed as a result of her work with a Woods Cree medicine man (211). In a narrative account of her experience on board a sailing ship, she tells of how her belief in guardian spirits and the power of a protector which she received from her Cree friend, "grew to the point where [she] could not begin or end a sailing expedition without making appropriate prayers or offerings" (215). She claims this is a result of having taken seriously the advice and visions of her Cree friend, whom she considers to be her informant.

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Antonia Mills discusses the possibility of believing in reincarnation in, "Making a Scientific Investigation of Ethnographic Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation." She believes that anthropologists can, in fact, make scientific investigations which will allow us to assess whether a belief in reincarnation is justified. She cites two cases of reincarnation as reported by the Gitskan of British Columbia, and a Hindu village in Etawah, India. Though both cases are somewhat questionable, Mills suggests that we do not cast them aside as indicating that reincarnation is an inconceivable phenomenon. As a result of these examinations and others from her fieldwork experiences, she admits that the reported cases certainly do not prove that reincarnation has taken place, but she is not satisfied with the concept of "cultural construction" (the community's desire to believe in reincarnation which often results in the "construction" of evidence to support it) as an adequate alternative explanation. Establishing criteria for the assessment of whether reincarnation has in fact occurred, Mills believes that current evidence suggests that reincarnation should not be dismissed.

In the "Conclusion" to the book, Yves Marton's "The Experiential Approach to Anthropology and Castaneda's Ambiguous Legacy" explores

the issues and controversies surrounding the work of Carlos Castaneda and his accounts of his spiritual apprenticeship with a Yaqui sorcerer by the name of Don Juan (23). Marton deals with the controversy surrounding Castaneda's work. He notes Castaneda's questionable integrity as a social scientist, his truthfulness, and his self-mystification. But Marton also argues that what Castaneda was presenting in the late 1960's was a rather non-conventional ethnographic depiction. In short, Castaneda's was the first extensive account of a spiritual and extraordinary account by a social scientist (273). In this sense, Marton presents this work as "innovative within anthropology, both in its format... and in the abundance and type of experiences that it reported from the field" (274). Regardless of how one perceives the legacy of Castaneda, Marton admits that it has certainly had an impact on experiential anthropology.

## COMMENT

This edited compilation is a comment on western epistemological constructions (anthropology is, after all, a western phenomenon). It argues that rational boundedness has hampered the ethnographic endeavor. An emic viewpoint is often the desired goal of ethnography and this usually requires some sort of 'suspension of disbelief,' since the experience of fieldwork often situates the anthropologist in what would appear to the western world as extraordinary circumstances. To western societies which acknowledge only one mode of reality—that based on physical concreteness, ideas such as shamanic healing, multiple levels of reality, and the seriousness of the dreamworld, appear quite bizarre since our rational boundedness encourages us to question the 'truth' of such ideas. To our cultural counterparts, as these essays demonstrate, these experiences are quite often ordinary. Anthropologists often entertain such 'extraordinary' ideas during the moment of fieldwork, but the return to the 'commonsense reality' often means a return to rationalism. In fact, that return is where *Being Changed* begins, where "one's informants are not taken seriously" (10). This idea comes out the strongest in Young and Goulet's concluding essay "Theoretical and Methodological Issues," as well as in Goulet's own essay. The contributors to this volume become exemplary: they have opened themselves up to the experience and reality of the cultural Other. The result is that they have themselves been changed, and the anthropological experience extends long beyond the fieldwork moment since they, like the mythical hero, bring a boon back from their

journey. This boon is quite intangible and comes packaged in the form of experience—the result is the expansion of the perceptual lens and a validation of the cross-cultural experience. In other words, these accounts are by anthropologists who have chosen to take their informants seriously.

The highlights of the volume are the essays by Goulet and Wilkie. Goulet's essay brings to mind how western perceptions of the dreamworld contrast with those perceptions of the Guajiro and Dene Tha. Among the latter, dreams are taken quite seriously and are given a special respect. Goulet himself was reassured: "yes, your dreams are true!" On the other hand, in the western world, when our children awake frightened by night visitors, we comfort them with the assurance that "it was *just* a dream." Thus, we deny the reality of the experience. Wilkie's essay, on the other hand, provides the reader with an informative discussion about issues of suspending disbelief and extraordinary experience. In his conclusion, he clarifies the 'true' nature of that Edmonton meeting: the "meeting purportedly recorded in the above 'transcript' is fictitious. It did take place, but only in the author's imagination" (162). In this sense, the essay itself, as well as its content, becomes a lesson in the suspension of disbelief when opening ourselves up to non-ordinary, 'strange' experiences. In fact, the reading of the essay becomes an extraordinary experience. Read this essay twice to get the point. Approaching it first as fact causes the reader to address it and its issues with a particular epistemological set. Upon the knowledge that it is 'non-factual,' this epistemological set changes, and the message is different. Embedded western rationalized assumptions cannot allow us to take Wilkie seriously. Nevertheless, anthropological studies of myth, dreams, and religion, show that truth is hardly contingent on historical fact. Here, an epistemological shift means personal transformation. Wilkie tells us, echoing Goulet, that he cannot begin to understand extraordinary experiences and world-views without paying attention to his own (163). In other words, he brings back a piece of the field with him, which means suspending disbelief and acknowledging the boundedness of our cultural constructions. Even if 'the field' in this case is a fictitious boardroom in Edmonton. Regardless, Wilkie's essay provides the reader with an exercise in rationality.

The essays fit tightly together and it becomes obvious that the editors went to great lengths in assuring a complementarity between them. However, there is one exception, the essay by Swartz. Here is a writer whose entire argument is based on her assertion that "I took my informant seriously" (226). Nevertheless, it is highly questionable that Russell Willier, her Cree friend,

can under the circumstances be seen as 'her informant.' Swartz's 'ethnographic description' is uncontextualized as anthropological research and comes across as an extended holiday. Did she indeed take him 'seriously?' She provides two particular instances when she was given the opportunity to participate in a ceremonial ritual, involving fasting and praying. The potential result in the first instance was learning of her guardian spirit and in the second instance her being given a protector. Under both circumstances, she states that "time and circumstances did not permit this" (213-214) even though in the second case, "Russell would recommend, even if this should delay my departure.... that I participate in a four-day vision quest... where I would be given a protector" (214). Instead, she arranged to meet him the day before her departure so that she could obtain this protector. Certainly one cannot be expected to believe that Russell was taken seriously! The author's life was in danger, but "circumstances could not allow" for her to consider either his request or her own safety? Beyond this, the degradation of the four day ritual to an *ad hoc* meeting, is a comment regarding not only the level of seriousness with which the Other was approached, but also the amount of respect allotted to the cultural traditions of the Other.

For the most part, these essays provide instances where anthropologists have in the least gained greater self-understanding by opening themselves up to the world-views of those they study. Thus the firework endeavor is presented as a learning experience. Michael Taussig has recently raised these issues in *Mimesis and Alterity* (1993), where he documents how the concepts of mimesis (imitation) and alterity (otherness) play off one another in maintaining and strengthening cultural solidarities and identity. He chooses the Kuna Indians as his example. Among the Kuna, the Self is understood through an examination of its Alter. Thus, Kuna ritual and mythological incorporations of European characters and characteristics have the purpose of strengthening their identity at a personal and collective level. As an example, C. Roderick Wilson has affirmed that his cross-cultural experiences have strengthened his Christian views, when one might certainly have expected the opposite (207). Similarly, the work of Young and Goulet informs us that it is through accepting as valid the experiences of our cultural counterparts, that we can better understand our own conventional realities. But this will require an acknowledgment of the scientific limitations imposed by western rationality.

*Being Changed* can, perhaps, be considered as following in the tradition of Turner's and Bruner's *The Anthropology of Experience* (1986), Benson's

*Anthropology and Literature* (1993), and Brady's *Anthropological Poetics* (1991). It foregrounds the question of validity, epistemology, and experience which necessarily arise when one immerses oneself in a culture which at a surface level appears so very foreign and extraordinary. These essays provide a comment on these issues and, uncluttered by thick description and anthropological jargon, a long overdue comment on experiential anthropology. The dialogical relationship between the cultural Other and the anthropologist is enhanced by viewing each as different aspects of the same essence, the same reality. The result is one of the most informative and entertaining compilations to come about in a long while.

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