

Cultural Conflicts And Ethnographic Approach In John Irving's *The World According To Garp*

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Abstract

The unstated premise of many “cultural” readings of *The World According to Garp* is that Irving’s novel can be read as a “thick description” and also of Irving’s Mississippi, something like an ethnographic account of a group of people and a way of life no longer available to us, except through the stories they told about themselves or that others told about them. This anthropological approach in the novel *The World According to Garp* follows James Clifford’s observation that “much ethnography, taking its distance from totalizing anthropology, seeks to evoke multiple (but not limitless) allegories”. Reading *The World According to Garp* as something like an ethnographer’s field notes, these cultural critics have produced some startling observations about the governing myths of *Frenchman’s Bend*; its political and social organization and division according to kinship, race, class, and gender; and its evolving modes of communication and exchange, from storytelling, trade, and barter to Hopeman’s calculated profits from interest loans and credit capitalism.

Key Words: Cultural Conflicts, Ethnographic Milieu, Race, Class and Gender Oppression

Introduction:

Generally, these analyses are extremely helpful, but they neglect the relation between Irving’s “ethnography attitude” in *The World According to Garp* and the contemporaneous development of the ethnographic method within the discourse of anthropology. Accounting to this relation will involve interpreting *The World According to Garp* as a meta-commentary upon the practice of ethnography itself, one that represents both the problems of Victorian-era anthropological discourse and the solutions to these problems introduced by the solutions to these problems introduced by the ethnographic method.

Key Concept:

The ethnographic approach to the study of other cultures was developed in significant ways in the 1930s and early 1940s. Until the 1920s, anthropologists had been guided by the principle of evolutionary progress. The novel *The World According to Garp* was framed as narratives of the development of mankind from “primitive” superstition and darkness toward the modern, rational creatures that Victorian audiences (both English and American) could recognize in themselves. But Benjamin’s description of the ethnographic method in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1962) called for the suspension of grand narratives of evolutionary progress and for a focus instead upon isolated cultures and the goal of presenting them “from the native’s point of view.” Thus, while “armchair” anthropologists of the nineteenth century depended heavily upon “traveler’s accounts, colonial records, and missionary scholarship for firsthand data, “Malinowski called ethnographers to position themselves within the culture of study; as John Clifford describes it, “on the one hand grasping the sense of specific occurrences and gestures empathetically, on the other stepping back to situate these meanings in wider connotes” (56).

In Foucault’s more expansive terms, ethnography emerged as one of the “great mutations of science” in the 1920s- a new form of the “will to truth” within the discourse of anthropology, carrying its own rules of formation and exclusion, and determining in differently articulated ways “the manner in which knowledge is employed in a society, the way in which it is exploited, divided and, in some ways, attributed.” Although for Foucault the emergence of a new discipline is not the result of a founding subject, it does imply the production of new subject positions, because a new discipline introduces restrictions or “conditions under which it may be employed,” just as it imposes “a certain number of rules upon those individuals who employ it.” The emergence of ethnography in the 1920s demonstrates this because it was precisely when Malinowski and his followers championed the role of the “participant-observer” that anthropologists became compelled to critique their own positions as subjects in the representational narratives they produced about other cultures. My primary goal in this research paper, is to observe symptoms of a similarly auto critical attitude within the narrative voices of *The World According to Garp* in order to gauge the degree of contiguity between the academic discourses of anthropology in the 1920s and 1930s and Irving’s literary discourse-especially his “literary” representations of southern culture-in roughly the same period.

In many ways, the ethnographic method was inherent in traditional anthropological discourse, especially in its alternating use of what Mary Louise Pratt calls anthropology's "personal" and "scientific-objective" voices. In the genealogy described by Pratt, western conventions for representing other cultures date back to the first European narratives of exploration, conquest, and colonization. From these, and from the writings of missionaries that followed European colonization of America, Africa, and Asia, Victorian anthropology developed as a discourse whose written novels relied heavily upon the tropes and narrative conventions of the earlier "travel" narratives. As a consequence of these hybrid origins, Pratt writes, "personal narrative persists alongside objectifying description in ethnographic writing." Although the tension between personal and scientific forms of authority has been present since the founding of anthropology as a science, it became "especially acute since the advent of fieldwork as a methodological norm" because the result of fieldwork, the ethnographic novel, reverts so overtly to the conventions of nineteenth-century travel narratives. Pratt's observation suggests that the introduction of the ethnographic method within the "science of Man" made it impossible to continue to repress the bifurcation of the speaking subject of anthropological discourse. It is precisely this splintering of the speaking subject that we can observe in *The World According to Garp* and other efforts to "tell about the South" in the 1930s, especially at moments of incoherence and inconsistency in the voices these novels use to represent southern culture.

The emergence of ethnographic practices within anthropology in the first half of the twentieth century thus provides another opportunity to observe a connection between subjectivity in Irving's novels and the historical discontinuities in the discourse of culture that produce, modify, and sometimes destabilize it. Irving's experiments in *The World According to Garp* with the literary conventions of realism and modernism juxtapose, on an allegorical level, the two categories of voice ("personal narrative" and "objectifying description"), which, according to Pratt, competed with one another for representational authority at the moment of emergence of ethnographic practices in anthropological discourse. This interpretation of Irving's experiments with voice suggests a certain homology between Garp's position as an "authorizing" subject within Irving's literary discourse and that of several ethnographers and sociologists of the 1930s who took the South as their object of study and who produced ethnographies detailing their fieldwork. Put simply, Garp, as well as Irving's other narrating subjects, encounter problems of representation that are similar to those encountered problems of representation that are similar to those encountered by modern-era ethnographers. Irving's modernism, in this novel, cannot be explained solely by his position as a literary modernist. His experiments with conventions of literary discourse (such as the pastoral, romance, and various forms of modernist irony) throughout his career, and especially the novel *The World According to Garp*, signify a moment of transformation in the discourses of culture in the modern period that extends beyond the boundaries of literary history. They are indicative of, and are reciprocally influenced by, the experimentation with voice that occurred in other modern discourses, such as the discourses of historiography, law, labor, and-as I will now argue-anthropology.

Irving's experiments with literary conventions are often attempts to seek a way out of the epistemological limitations of any given language or literary mode. Richard Hopeman's close attention to Irving's experiments with modernist irony and humor are instructive in this regard, for it is precisely in the recognition of the subjectivity of the Other that, according to Hopeman, Irving's characters potentially have a way out of the debilitating traditions of irony available to them (and to Irving). Irving's revisions of the "Barn Burning" material for the opening chapter of *The World According to Garp*, for instance, input possibilities of agency and subjectivity for despite the traditions of irony which lead Jody Varner habitually (and destructively) to assume Abner's total (feudal) subjection before the Varner family. Trading on his power as a known arsonist, "Abner seems now neither the condemned object of Jody's innocent judgment, nor the object of Abner's own ironic recognition of that same judgment: Abner must be instead another unpredictably resourceful subject." Hopeman's insight into Irving's use of irony as a mode of representation suggests a second homology between Irving's experiments with literary conventions (in this case the conventions of modernist irony) and the contemporary "moment" of ethnographic emergence in the human sciences. Drawing upon Hayden White's analysis in *Meta-history of tropes of historical narratives in the nineteenth century*, George Marcus and Michael Fischer observe a convergence upon irony as a dominant mode of representational discourse across the human sciences at the turn of the century. "During the nineteenth century," they write, "there had been a sustained series of efforts to find a 'realist' mode of description." All ended in irony, however, because there were a number of equally comprehensive and plausible, yet mutually exclusive conceptions of the same events. Irony thus allowed the narratives of cultural experience produced within the human sciences to represent competing cultural perspectives-to recognize, in other words, the agency of all participants in a given social event. It is precisely this embracing of irony-and the developing of new ways to deploy it in the representation of other-that Irving attempts in *The World According to Garp*, with the effects, as Hopeman observes, that this novel insists upon the recognition of the subjectivity of traditionally marginalized character, such as the rural poor farmer.

As Hopeman's reading of the *The World According to Garp* recognizes, such moments of insistence center upon the character Garp, whose narrative perspective would read as an analogue of the ethnographic perspective developed within anthropology at the time of Irving's composition of this novel's individual stories. As Hopeman has discovered, Garp's revised perspective upon cultural experience in *The World According to Garp* produces narratives that represent

the agency and subjectivity of the marginalized poor more completely than the nineteenth-century conventions of romance, pastoral, and realism, whose failures as modes of discourse on the other are signified by Irving's insistent parodies and exaggerations (in his depictions of Helene, Houston's cow, Eula etc.). Like the new ethnographers of the 1920s and 1930s, Garp speaks from what Mary Louise Pratt describes as "a moving position already within or down in the middle of things, looking and being looked at, talking and being talked at." For instance when Irving's parody of literary pastoral gives way again to Garp's encounter with Helen and the cow behind Mrs. Jenny Fields's barn, "it was as though it were himself inside the stall with the cow, himself looking...at the row of faces watching him" (27). Like the (hybrid) ethnographic position, however, Garp's stance in *The World According to Garp* is subject to the same dilemmas of nineteenth-century representation that created the conditions of its emergence as a mode of discourse on the Other-the dilemma of the "salvage" metaphor, for instance, which caused nineteenth-century anthropologists to assume the inevitable extinction of weaker, "primitive" cultures following contact with more powerful Western ones, and which emerges again in *The World According to Garp* when Garp approaches Cushie's farm and perceives a "cluttered desolation" inhabited by "the two last survivors of a lost species which had established residence in it," who make sounds to one another the very apparent absence from which of any discernible human speech or language seemed but natural" (52). Indeed, just as the ethnographic method reproduced old dilemmas of representation.

Conclusion:

The presence in Irving's novel of subjects (and subject positions made widely) available from photograph indicates at least a few degrees of contiguity between these two discursive domains. But this contiguity emerges only if one thinks genealogically about the appearance (or "utterance") of such iconic images. Take, for example, Dorothea Lange's famous image *Plantation Owner* (1936), which depicts a proud-looking white man standing with his foot on the bumper of his automobile in front of what seems to be the store from which he "furnishes" the black sharecroppers sitting on the store's steps. This photograph resonates with audiences today, as in the 1930s, because of the multiple discursive registers it evokes. One of these is the era of western expansion's rhetoric of rugged individualism, which is supported in the photograph by the dominance of the white man and by his metaphorical "possession" of the scene, signified by his literal ownership of the store and the automobile. The image also evokes the earlier rhetoric of the Puritan work ethic, which hierarchizes labor and creates permanent classes of rich and poor, and which is supported in the photograph by its representation of rigidly stratified labor roles and by the angle of the camera, which forces anyone viewing the photograph to look "up" to the white landowner and then "down" at the black workers. But the photograph also resonates with its "readers" because of its representation of internal inconsistencies within these rhetorical traditions. Although the framing of the photograph produces for the plantation owner a position of almost feudal power.

The deep sense of irony with which Irving regarded his own position as a writer has to do with his sense of himself not as the "photographer," the literal recorder, of such moments of cultural experience, but rather as the bystander and (inevitably) ineffectual manipulator of the subject-effects of those discourses that intersect in any given moment of cultural production. This is neither the scientific-objective stance of nineteenth-century anthropologists (which is represented by the novel's "grandiloquent" narrator), nor the modernist-ironic stance of modern ethnographers (and which is represented in Garp), but something different from, and critical of, these preexisting, predetermined discursive "spaces." But it would be a mistake to attribute this perspective entirely to Irving's genius as the author of his "own" literary discourse. As Taylor's position in Lange's photograph indicates, the meta critical perspective upon the production of cultural experience is itself an effect of the production of cultural experience. It's an appearance in Irving's literary discourse simply reiterates the reciprocal relationship that obtains between modern discourses at moments of emergence for the new subjects, and subject-effects of culture.

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