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Cancian Replies to Collier

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mountain villages from those in the valley. Each produces its own characteristic gestalts for dealing with the environment. Coles does name Cordova where Mrs. Garcia lives, but hides the identity of the other three. Another point to understand is that what impresses one the most about village life is that it is made up of a complex web of strong personalities and their relationships to each other set in the unconscious matrix of Spanish culture. Yet there is no feeling in Coles’ book for the interplay of either personalities or culture at the deeper levels. In fact, one is left with the impression that these do not exist. These relationships are not discovered overnight, and the Spanish, like every other ethnic group, cannot describe the structure of the paradigms by which they live. The observer has to be around long enough and be involved enough to recognize and define these paradigms. Unfortunately most research in social science is geared to one- to five-year time spans, and the investigators must “produce” within these times frames because that is the way their work is funded. How can the results be anything but superficial?

Question 3. How about the “facts” related to the people Coles writes about. On page 16, he notes, “boredom or indifference” . . . to “politics”!! Why this conclusion? Because the Garcias don’t listen to Walter Cronkite and John Chancellor. Why should they? Cronkite and Chancellor live in Coles’ world, not the world of the Garcias. The fact that it is a different world does not make it less valid, involving, or rewarding to live in. Politics in New Mexico are local—characteristically personal and intense. To give the impression that indigenous New Mexicans are apolitical is a distortion of the worst kind.

The importance of the church in New Mexican life comes through and, if anything, is overemphasized, but I suspect that the emphasis on God, church, and priest may be simply an artifact of Coles’ methodology. Coles (p. 14) seems surprised that the people are philosophers. What does he expect when an Anglo outsider comes in and wants to immortalize his subject’s speech by putting it in a book? These people are talking for the record when Coles is not talking for them, and there is no way to tell which is which. However, what I object to is not a particular sentence or word attributed to his subjects but the totality of these texts and commentaries. This book is like a Norman Rockwell painting or a portrait by Bachrach, designed to appear more like the idealized image than to convey a sense of reality. In this connection, when I questioned individuals who have lived in New Mexico all their lives and who have worked at the interface between Anglo and Spanish American culture, their first comments were how improbable the conversation sounded as reported by Coles. “He is silent because he understands the world!” (p. 23). Who ever heard “No habla porque entiende el mundo” coming from the mouth of a Truchas villager?

For years, recording people’s speech and juggling sentences and situations to hide identities has been a popular device of social science. Given the mass of raw data this technique generates, it is an easy method for fieldworkers. Yet the very convenience of the system obscures its defects and pitfalls, of which there are a number. Unless one is extraordinarily gifted and has a deep feeling for pattern, the people lose their dimensionality and become flat, pastelboard figures, colorless and devoid of the juice of life and of all human frailty. The people in The Old Ones are unreal. The Spanish Americans of New Mexico have blood in their veins and are subject to the same negative human emotions, greed, envy, lust, anger, and hate as the rest of humanity. None of this comes out.

Some mention of Alex Harris (Coles’ photographic collaborator and friend) is in order. Coles calls him a “pioneer.” He states that Harris’s photographs are the first real efforts to document the life of the people. All other photographers are supposed to have been captivated by the country. Clearly, Irving Rusinow’s Camera Report on El Cerrito was overlooked, but no doubt the 1942 publication date had something to do with this. In discussing photographs it is very important to remember that man does not see passively. He paints his own picture of the world with his eyes, and even more so with a camera. Harris’s photographs are no exception. Another photographer would have told a different story, and if the reader takes this to heart he will not be misled. The Old Ones is a story by Coles and Harris. It is their story, and a much better picture of what they see, think, and value than it is of the people who mouth the sentiments that Coles chose to include in the text. People are always looking at things through their own eyes, which would be all right if only they would realize that what they see is not always what is there. We see this most graphically in Harris’s photographs—he repeats all of Coles’ clichés and thereby reinforces the middle-class stereotyped distortions. One returns to the fact that one does not see passively. What Harris sees, the Spanish do not like, which is one of the ways we know that their visual models are different from ours. Behind these differences one sees two cultures struggling to reach each other with little or no awareness on the part of either the social scientist or the photographer that cultural differences are far from abstract, but are instead very real, very deep, and extraordinarily subtle.

Note

1 This review is a slightly revised version of a review appearing in the Rio Grande Sun (Santa Fe, New Mexico), Vol. 1, No. 4, September 5, 1974.

CANCIAN REPLIES TO COLLIER

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I thank the Book Review Editor for inviting me to reply to John Collier’s review of my Another Place: Photographs of a Maya Community (Scrimshaw Press, 1974) which appears in the first number of this journal (Studies 1:60-61, 1974).

I would like to respond to: (1) Collier’s comment on the message of the book; (2) his comments on the organization of the book; (3) his speculations about my intent as a person and an anthropologist; and (4) his exploration of the proper nature of visual anthropology. First, I want to say that Collier has not really reviewed my book. He begins by stating that “it offers a starting point for reasoning and exploring further the contribution of visual communication for anthropology, for it places focus on the intellectual and creative role of the anthropologist.” In what follows, I serve as his
straw anthropologist and the book serves as the foil against which he expounds his conception of orthodoxy for visual anthropology.

Collier ridicules the title and principal message of the book by comparing it to the logically suspect “People have to live somewhere, so everywhere there are some people.” “Zinacantan is another place where people live” (the final line of my introduction) is clearly, in the context given it, a phrasing of the standard message: despite their differences, people share a common humanity. Anthropologists and many other people are constantly struggling in life and work with the distance between humans created by cultural difference. The fact that one more statement about common humanity will not solve the problem does not justify Collier’s refusal to see it for what it is.

I believe it is useful to portray people in other cultures in a way that will permit the viewer to see commonalities. To take some obvious examples from Another Place: young people at the courtship age (pp. 11, 49), a young girl playing at women’s work (p. 25), a boy tightening and expanding his line of my introduction) is to live somewhere, so everywhere there are some many other people are constantly struggling in life and work the self-confidence and positive feeling in the religious of­

The book also pictures the material and political realities of Zinacanteco life; and a part of the introduction Collier does not quote makes explicit the position of subjugation they share with other Chiapas Indians and the positive ways they use ethnic identity and community boundaries to build their own world. Certainly Collier could see the contradic­tion between children living in the situation the book shows and the message on the school blackboard. He might have seen a similar message in the Coca Cola sign or in the Mexican wedding in the city. And he could have picked up the self-confidence and positive feeling in the religious of­

These contradictory realities—human commonalities, specific material and political superordination/subordination, and construction of a bounded more tolerable ingroup—are omnipresent, and showing them in the life of Zinancantecos is simply another reminder that life is not simple. Collier’s search for further meaning (paragraph 4 of his review) is unrewarded in part, I suppose, because I intended no further meaning.

Collier also charges that “the book has no layout, no sequential relationships; pictures tumble one upon the other with little association.” This is not so. Collier spots the intro­ductory (pp. 7-15) and concluding (pp. 85-93) photographs for what they are. He misses the interplay between photo­graphs of specific activities outside the home, on the one hand, and portraits and domestic scenes on the other.

The transitions from outside to inside are not marked (except by content of the photographs), and the viewer could easily miss them. It was not my purpose to have them noticed, and that may have been a mistake in design of the book, for many readers may want more structure than I give. It is, however, characteristic of Collier’s gratuitous negativism that he fails to mention, and apparently fails to notice, that each “outside” section begins with a full page devoted to a short introductory paragraph.

The book is also organized, visually, in terms of self-con­scious use sequences of righthand pages, and repeated use of walking and weaving pictures. The layout is not hung on a scientific framework, to be sure.

I will now go on to Collier’s speculation about my intent as a person and an anthropologist. He is concerned about “doubt in the author’s mind about photography’s place in anthropological research” (paragraph 5); “But as an anthrop­ologist, what is he trying to explore in this book?” (para­graph 7, emphasis in original); and “why did Cancian want to retreat from anthropology?” (paragraph 8).

Collier does not recognize the simple fact that I am a photographer who is also an anthropologist. If I, or other anthropologists who are also photographers, had to be one “thing,” and that was the thing he or she was “best” at, most of us would probably be anthropologists. But, roles are not that mutually exclusive. People do live with internal contradic­tions and conflicts, and across categories.

For me, Another Place is a coherent book. I say this as a photographer who did not leave his anthropological role behind when working on the book. I saw no point in separat­ing the roles as long as the academic anthropologist did not try to take over. As a consequence, it is hard to know clearly in what sense the book is anthropology; but that is important only if you have a high investment in the boundaries of anthropology. In the academic world it is common to eschew confusion and conflict and erect rigid intellectual boundaries. I did not intend an academic book.

Finally, what about the contributions of visual commu­nication for anthropology that Collier sets out to “explore”? They are complicated and apt to be very diverse, I think. And they will range from pictures of artifacts used as records, to stills and film used as a basis for behavioral analy­sis, to photographs used as interview aids, to photos, essays and films that give people the “feel” of people and places. The photograph as data, the photograph as illustration, and the photograph as communication are all included.

I support Collier’s exploration of the issues of the subjective and the objective, the humanistic and the scientific, the nature of photography as assertion and description. But he seems tired of the debate and determined to impose a unique and fairly restricted solution. He seems ready for rules, not exploration. Just as many people have begun to fully under­stand the limitations of “objective” science, to which Collier refers, he seems ready to close up shop. In many ways he has led visual anthropology to the edge of flourishing by his hard work during the difficult times. I hope he agrees that if success is transformed into conformity, failure will be just around the corner.

Note

Outside activities are school (pp. 17-21), fiestas (pp. 27-35), the market city (pp. 41-45), men’s agricultural work (pp. 51-59), the Zinacanteco political-legal system (pp. 65-71), and Zinacanteco curing (pp. 77-83). The contrasting portraits and inside scenes fill pages 22-25, 36-39, 46-49, 60-63, and 72-75.