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# An Ethnographic Filmflam: Giving Gifts, Doing Research, and Videotaping the Native Subject/Object

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## **Abstract**

Using the discussion of self-reflexivity as an organizing principle, this article examines how mobilizing digital video technology during fieldwork opens up empirical and theoretical space for reconceptualizing the relationship between anthropologists and informants. Placing the field of visual anthropology into critical conversation with long-standing theoretical arguments about the objectivist limitations of native anthropologists, I argue that the slipperiness of nativity as an anthropological designation helps to provide analytical tools for examining filmmaking as a kind of gift-giving process between native ethnographic filmmakers and the subjects of their films. This article highlights some of the ways in which my own filmic and videographic exploits in Harlem, New York, mark integral connections between seeing and being the proverbial other, probing social exchanges predicated on the usefulness of low-budget digital technology as a means of fostering politically and epistemologically valuable ethnographic collaborations.

## **Keywords**

Black America, native anthropology, visual anthropology, reflexivity, gifts

## **Disciplines**

Anthropology | Communication | Social and Behavioral Sciences



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## An Ethnographic *Filmflam*: Giving Gifts, Doing Research, and Videotaping the Native Subject/Object

**ABSTRACT** Using the discussion of self-reflexivity as an organizing principle, this article examines how mobilizing digital video technology during fieldwork opens up empirical and theoretical space for reconceptualizing the relationship between anthropologists and informants. Placing the field of visual anthropology into critical conversation with long-standing theoretical arguments about the objectivist limitations of native anthropologists, I argue that the slipperiness of nativity as an anthropological designation helps to provide analytical tools for examining filmmaking as a kind of gift-giving process between native ethnographic filmmakers and the subjects of their films. This article highlights some of the ways in which my own filmic and videographic exploits in Harlem, New York, mark integral connections between seeing and being the proverbial other, probing social exchanges predicated on the usefulness of low-budget digital technology as a means of fostering politically and epistemologically valuable ethnographic collaborations. [Keywords: Black America, native anthropology, visual anthropology, reflexivity, gifts]

**L**IKE OTHER CONTEMPORARY HARLEM LANDMARKS, Sylvia's restaurant exemplifies the presentational self-consciousness and self-referentiality that defines prevalent forms of Black visual culture today. Entering the soul food establishment's main lobby entranceway, a multitiered glass case on the near right wall displays an assortment of mass-produced Sylvia's merchandise manufactured for a national retail and wholesale market: Sylvia's-brand hot sauces and salad dressings, powdered pancake mixes and canned collard greens, glossy cookbooks and silk-screened T-shirts, prepackaged candied yams and black-eyed peas, even moisturizing shampoos and men's colognes. Almost all of it is marked with the selfsame photographic portrait of an iconic Sylvia Woods donning a chef's hat and offering up her best motherly smile. Along the walls of the central dining room, autographed publicity photos of various international celebrities hang interspersed with candid shots of other famous patrons posing inside Sylvia's with their arms wrapped around the back of its locally mythical owner, the "Queen of Soul Food." Each photo is signed to either Sylvia or Sylvia's and expresses appreciation for the existence of such "an important local institution," one that "does Harlem proud!"

On this particular day, a double-decker bus full of tourists spits its contents out onto the sidewalk space in front of the restaurant. Disembarking sightseers mill about along Lenox Avenue, snapping pictures and recording Hi-8 and mini-DV video footage of themselves and their friends

grinning eagerly beneath Sylvia's flickering yellow neon sign. Back inside the dining area, two young Asian women tap Sylvia on the shoulder to ask if they can take a picture with her. She graciously obliges, adjusting her hair and blouse as one of the women removes a small digital camera from the dark blue Harlem USA knapsack strapped to her back.

Two tables away, I am eating fried chicken under former Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's framed, frozen gaze and talking with local tenant activist Nellie Bailey. I have taken Nellie to Sylvia's so that I can finally pin her down for an upcoming film shoot. I am coproducing an ethnographic film on gentrification with a local Harlem filmmaker, and we are trying to finish principal photography by capturing the energy and activity of Nellie's daily grind; we want to spend a few weeks trailing her with a mini-DV camera as she visits local tenants who complain of landlord harassment and unlawful eviction attempts. But Nellie has a request for me, too. Her organization, the Harlem Tenant's Council, has just been given the go-ahead to use local community-access cable equipment to produce their own documentary, and Nellie wants to put together a video guide for senior citizens explaining their rights as tenants and delineating clear-cut strategies for tenant organizing. With her busy schedule, she has little time to produce such a filmic document herself, and so she proffers a quid pro quo: I can film some of her activist work in Harlem ("no problem," she says), but she also wants help putting together

this short documentary for elderly Harlemites. “That’s the way we have to get these things done,” she says. “We have to share our skills and expertise so that we can make the most out of the resources we have. There are tons of talented people here in Harlem. We just have to learn to make use of one another’s skills. Pool our resources. That way we all win. Harlem wins.”

This short ethnographic scene from Sylvia’s famous eatery helps to concretize some of the connections between visual anthropology and native anthropology, connections that overdetermine the kinds of exchanges and interactions possible for an African American filmmaker/anthropologist working in contemporary Black America. The questions that these two subfields put to the center of the discipline they share are fundamental and foundational indeed; however, these queries are also predicated on certain renditions of ethnographic subjectivity and praxis that beg for (and usually receive) unrelenting criticism and deconstruction: What/who is a “native anthropologist” and how does knowledge produced by such a researcher compare with the so-called nonnative variety (Aguilar 1981; Jacobs-Huey 2002; Nakhleh 1979; Okely 1996)? What are the intradisciplinary limits of “visual anthropology” (i.e., what on earth would *not* be called *visual anthropology*)? How might that institutionally policed and explicitly labeled subfield be understood in the context of traditional anthropological inquiries that have always been organized around a certain ocularcentrist privileging of what anthropologists *see* as the centerpiece for what they can be said to know about the social world (Banks and Morphy 1997; Hockings 1995; Jay 1993; Warnke 1993)?

Using ethnographic fieldwork in contemporary Black America as a backdrop and rehearsal space for my own attempts at anthropological theorizing, I analyze just a few of the ways in which the “native” and the “visual” in contemporary anthropological discourse and practice might be said to productively intersect. As the abovementioned Sylvia’s example highlights, there is much that “visual studies” can bring to bear on a place like Harlem: a place where tourist technophiles take still and moving images of community landmarks; where local business owners authenticate their establishments with recourse to signed and wall-mounted celebrity snapshots; where community activists mobilize free community-access video equipment to educate low-income tenants about their rights; and where anthropologists flout neutrality by agreeing to co-produce activists’ documentaries, unabashedly and complicatedly “participating in the processes of cultural objectification” (Ginsburg et al. 2002:22). I would like to place these visual matters in conversation with my current concern about the politics and pragmatics of native anthropology, a concern specifically sparked by the fact that my own relationship to Harlem as an ethnographic field site is usually understood (by academic colleagues and Harlemites alike) as an example of just such nativist research. I’m interested in the assumptions at play here and how they impact ethnographic fieldwork. Moreover, how much

would the application of new media technology alter that intersubjective landscape?

Toward these ends, I provide a brief overview of the literatures on native anthropology and visual anthropology and argue for a more reflexive understanding of how these two literatures inform one another. I make a distinction between “rigorous reflexivity” and more mechanical or superficial varieties. I also consider how certain mobilizations of media technology (specifically, digital video cameras) help to redefine the commonsensical borders we prop up between natives and foreigners, anthropologists and informants, ethnographic facts and ethnographic fictions. Examining how these two porous spheres of anthropological knowledge production (visual and native anthropology) complicate one another, while redefining the relationships ethnographers have in the field, could add some new-fangled nuance to important discussions already afoot within cultural anthropology about the limits of anthropological knowledge and the methodological mechanisms for securing cross-cultural truths (Asad 1973; Clifford 1988, 1997; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Jackson 1989; Pratt 1992). I end by mobilizing the notion of exchange (specifically, gift giving) to illuminate the theoretical and personal consequences of my own video work in contemporary urban communities.

### ANTHROPOLOGICAL NATIVITY SCENES: THE BASIC FAULT LINES

One way to start a discussion about the underpinnings of anthropological knowledge production is to argue the obvious: that Western anthropologists’ authority is predicated on displaying an intimate and exhaustive understanding of divergent cultural landscapes. The point has been to master the life-ways of specific cultures so thoroughly and completely as to understand those cultures as though one were looking through the natives’ own eyes. Traditionally, this kind of perspective was labeled “emic” and likened to an approximation of nativist self-understanding (Harris 1999; Headland 1991). Of course, if that maneuver was ethnographically sufficient, the natives could just speak for themselves (provided we first conceded the representativeness of *any* specific native as stand-in for *all* natives from a given community). However, instead of reducing the anthropological project to such a narrowly mimetic faculty, an analytic (and etic) layer of explanatory scaffolding is placed atop these emic understandings, elucidating deeper significances of foreign cultural worlds—deeper meanings not necessarily apparent or even recognizable to the native practitioners themselves. It is this secondary impulse, the move from emic to etic comprehension, which grounds anthropological claims about scientific knowledge production. Anthropological truths are not reducible to knowing the *other* as if one were an *other*; they also entail translating those local understandings into a more general theory of translocal factuality and objectivity: Georg Simmel’s oft-invoked

“stranger” (1950) reimagined as Barley’s “innocent anthropologist” (1983) capable of examining a foreign land with much less prejudicial bias than any overly invested native could muster.<sup>1</sup>

This is where tensions between the native and the nonnative in anthropology begin to tug at each other’s heuristic limits. The scientific researcher engages in intense and long-term participant observation so as to understand a culture from the inside out; however, that is just the first half of a two-pronged process. The conventional Western anthropologist, remember, is not really a native and, therefore, finds it quite necessary to determine when enough is enough, when it is finally time to emerge from the fray of the field to write-up (Sanjek 1990). Such writing allows space (in the literally geographical sense) for a certain critical separation between native and re-civilized anthropologist, a crucial distance that permits the anthropologist to see not just *through* the native’s eyes but also to examine those natives’ eyes through a much more powerfully scientific pair. Thus, even if the native anthropologist might be said to understand his/her native population more intimately and intensely than the foreign researcher, the native anthropologist is still assumed to be less adept at creating the kind of objective detachment needed to properly interpret the emic *etically*, to turn humanistic rumination into true scientific fact. As some anthropologists argue, “this attitude strongly implies that native and female [women working on feminist issues] anthropologists are seen as potential ‘tools’ to be used to provide important information to the ‘real,’ white male anthropologists” (Jones 1970:252). That is, unless those “*real*, white male anthropologists” go “native” à la Frank Cushing—the anthropological equivalent of a Tarzanic complex wherein Western anthropologists unlearn their ability to speak (i.e., to publish) and apingly over-identify with the behavioral alterity of that researched *other* (McFeely 2001; Paul 1953).

Native ethnographers are believed to start out from this overly identificatory position, relinquishing some of their ability to create requisite dissociation from the field that writing up is supposed to encapsulate. The hunters and trappers conquer the wild *other*; they do not, like Tarzan and Cushing, become it. Native anthropologists are assumed to be agential extensions of this same wildness; they do not, like real anthropologists, stand above and beyond it in a posture of laboratorial scrutiny—even when these anthropologists are U.S. citizens working in minority communities in the United States.

Since at least the early 1970s, this same argument about native anthropology’s implications and limitations has been rehearsed and rerehearsed in various guises (Abu-Lughod 1988; Jacobs-Huey 2002; Ohnuki-Tierney 1984). The personal investments and community-shared histories of native anthropologists may be presumed to provide a richer *subjective* knowledge of a given social group, but that same subjectivity is believed to compromise attempts at the objective disinterest necessary for anthropological

neutrality and scientificity. Of course, once the hardest and fastest scientific claims of anthropology were thrown into doubt with metaethnographic arguments about ethnography’s fictionalized constructedness (about how truth-claims get secured through rhetorical, narratological, and textual strategies), the earth began to shake and crumble a bit beneath the impartial ground of nonnative anthropological inquiry (Clifford 1988; Rosenau 1991).<sup>2</sup>

Some of the most compelling renditions of native anthropology start with the premise that it provides much-needed “correctives” to traditional ethnographic representations, representations reread and reinterpreted less as scientifically objective than orientalistically fantastic (Gwaltney 1981; Said 1978). Some of anthropology’s claims to detached impartiality were said to mask very biased and stereotypical presuppositions—stereotypes that the native anthropologist felt chosen, even annointed, to dispel. Once scientific and objectivist claims for privileging the outsider anthropologist over the insider began to fall away, however, another political project became even more important to the native anthropological cause: the use of ethnographic research for the explicit political benefit of one’s people, the co-natives under study. This meant changing the epistemologies and methodologies that were operative in the field, requiring due diligence on the part of the native ethnographer: “The native anthropologist, the insider, must be ideologically conscious during her study else her research become coopted” (Haniff 1985:107). Doing native anthropology becomes doing a very different kind of anthropology entirely. It means embracing a certain brand of “native politics” (Slocum 2001:146). Delmos Jones put it quite forcefully: “A Black Man in this century cannot avoid identifying with his people. I am an intrinsic part of the social situation that I am attempting to study. As part of the situation, I must also attempt to forge a solution” (Jones 1970:255). This was a notion of native anthropology that was not simply an epistemological or methodological corrective; it was also a distinctively political intervention: “Foregrounding *native* in relation to anthropology, or oneself as a native anthropologist, can act as an empowering gesture and critique of the positionings of natives in the stagnant slot of the Other” (Jacobs-Huey 2002:800). Here, ethnography is not just a research method; it is also a new work ethic, a new scientific policy, a new kind of salvage ethnography that saves natives from the abuses of feigned neutrality.

These same sentiments rest at the center of Nellie Bailey’s aforementioned cable-access request and speak directly to anthropological debates about nativity, politics, and ethnographic practice. When Bailey asks me to help produce her documentary film for seniors, she is operating with the reasonable assumption that my engagement with her (and with the discipline of anthropology) extends beyond claims to scientific impartiality. I am presumed to *embody* a racial politic, a presumption based, at least partially, on commonsensical acceptance of my nativity as an African American working in Harlem—someone who surely

stands to benefit whenever “Harlem wins.” Victory in Harlem often translates into a decidedly racial winner’s circle.

Alongside these same concerns/assumptions about nativist solidarity, one can locate equally valuable theoretical arguments that deconstruct the discreteness and mutual exclusivity of categories like “native” and “nonnative” as adjectival parsings of anthropologists and their sociopolitical locations. As the title for Kirin Narayan’s important 1993 article stated: “How native is a native anthropologist” anyway? That is, if middle-class African Americans are the advancing front guard for a gentrification push that threatens to displace poorer Harlem residents (the very same tenants that Nellie Bailey wants to educate through media technology), how can it be assumed that my own professionally middle-class status will not compromise my commitment to keeping poorer Black Harlemites housed? This is especially complicated since some of the residents most interested in my Harlem research (and probably most likely to purchase my books) are these same newly arriving Black middle-class community members.

Discussing this very dynamic, John Augilar (1981) and Donald Messerschmidt (1981) have characterized academia’s professionalization process as socializing a certain kind of elite difference within all of its initiates, regardless of their supposedly nativist beginnings. It is this same problematic that guided poet and feminist Audre Lorde’s differently bifurcated discussion about the limits of nativist reappropriations—specifically, whether slaves can use their master’s tools to actually dismantle their master’s homes (Lorde 1984). That is, how clean is a methodological baby formerly washed in Westernized bathwater? And how can anthropology ever be “decolonized” (Harrison 1991) from within its own ivory-towered and institutionalized comfort zone? Revolutionary Martinican scholar Frantz Fanon (1967) also made this point when he argued that the metropole-trained native is just as foreign (*vis-à-vis* the colony) as the foreigner—if not more so—and certainly just as potentially detrimental to the revolutionary project. As an African American anthropologist working in urban Black America, one tiptoes gingerly along a tight-rope hoisted high above and between the Scylla of racial belonging and the Charybdis of class-based cooptation. According to some, the script is already written, the roles cast: One can play only sellout or savior.

Narayan eschews the binaries of native–foreigner, insider–outsider, colonizer–colonized, and sellout–savior for the idea that “we might more profitably view each anthropologist in terms of shifting identifications amid a field of interpenetrating communities and power relations” (1993: 671). She calls for “the enactment of hybridity in our texts” and an understanding of all anthropological authors “as minimally bicultural” (1993:672). All ethnographers are asked to embrace both the native and the foreigner inside them. For some, this might sound a little like Zen and the art of identificatory voluntarism. As Karla Slocum (2001) points out, this particular argument, however ultimately compelling, might also be said to finesse the issue of

power differentials that make certain embraceable identities more or less valid than others, more or less native than others, more or less marked than others.<sup>3</sup>

These questions about the precarious possibility of unproblematically being native and the political implications of embracing nativity speak to some of the important fault-lines that define how native anthropology is understood in contemporary contexts, especially when the relationship between informant and researcher is often inherently hierarchized no matter how closely the native fieldworker identifies with those in the field. This is a hierarchization that is recognized from across both sides of the ethnographic track, a recognition that Brackette Williams flags as comprehension of the differences between “skin-folk” and true “kinfolk” (Williams 1996). Some of these kinds of s/kinfolk distinctions are a function of class differences between the middle-class native anthropologist and the less-well-off informant being studied—a reminder that class differences exist even among members of marginalized communities and that one can also “study up” (Nader 1974) within racially stigmatized groups by examining the lives of people like Sylvia Woods or Nellie Bailey and not just focusing exclusively on Harlem’s poorest residents.<sup>4</sup>

German philosopher Walter Benjamin (1968) might offer some of the best routes of escape from both simplistic dismissals of native naiveté and countervailing essentialist excesses about native authenticity. Benjamin matter-of-factly declares that the storyteller (as much the *ur* anthropologist as Simmel’s “stranger” ever was) can hail from both faraway lands and the very center of the teller’s own community. If anthropology is a powerful technique for telling stories about the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves, then the so-called native is simply mandated to offer up a tale that compels us all to huddle that much closer around the scholastic campfire. And how much tighter the yarn gets spun when the anthropologist/storyteller is also able to use media technology to peer over that flame and catch the native looking at the anthropologist looking at the native watching back (Michaels 1982).

## FROM NATIVIZING TO VISUALIZING THE ANTHROPOLOGIST

Visual anthropology has constantly asserted and reasserted itself as a vibrant and valuable subfield within the discipline. In fact, visual technologies were given an important role in ethnographic research from quite early on (Marks 1995; Rony 1996). Just as the Lumière brothers unveiled their crowd-pleasing filmic invention in the 1890s, scientists and naturalists (protoanthropologists) were using that same equipment on ethnographic excursions to Europe’s Oceanic “other” as well as in internationally attended exhibits of Europe’s African “others” presented right in the middle of Paris—and all before the 20th century (Grimshaw 2001). From the very beginning, theorizing the relationship between this new media form and a still relatively new (and newly institutionalized) disciplinary

practice (academic anthropology) entailed making claims about film's scientific pedigree and usefulness, which meant likening it to the microscope, telescope, and thermometer in terms of realist specificity (Winston 1993). Again, the point was greater scientific objectivity and neutrality—and it was argued that the cinematographe would surely assist in that cause.

As film's grammar was refined and reformulated by filmmakers like Eisenstein, Vertov and Griffith in the first and second decades of the 20th century, anthropology redefined its relationship to this new medium (Ginsburg 1994; Grimshaw 2001). In the early 1920s, as Malinowski was reconfiguring the nature of anthropological research, Robert Flaherty conjured the formal beginnings of ethnographic filmmaking. Flaherty told an overly romanticized story about a character he renamed Nanook and depicted alongside a fictitious Inuit family (Barbash and Taylor 1997; Rony 1996). In the 1930s and 1940s, the Mead–Bateson filmic collaborations helped to continue the discipline's fascination with the prospect of using visual data as potential ethnographic data—combating the literary and textual fetishizations of an anthropology that Mead would later disapprovingly label “a discipline of words” (Ginsburg 1994; Mead 1975; Ruby 2000). In 1950s Europe, Jean Rouch continued the kind of fiction/nonfiction boundary blurring that Flaherty had utilized for *Nanook* (and even more self-consciously), engaging in what he labeled “shared anthropology” and offering viewers “ethnofictions” (films purposefully embracing fictional techniques to tell ethnographic truths). “Fiction,” Rouch argued, “is the only way to penetrate reality” (Feld 2003:6). Rouch claimed to actually produce his films for the very Africans depicted in them—what might be called a spectatorially native cinema (Diawara 1995a; Stoller 1992).

In the United States over the past 40 years, just as questions of the visual in anthropology were beginning to gain a new kind of theoretical significance, academic spaces were opened up for the codification of visual anthropology as an officially sanctioned subfield within the academy—replete with its own section in the American Anthropological Association and its own refereed journals. In the 1960s, Wenner-Gren funding created the Program in Ethnographic Film out of an initiative spearheaded by a group of New England-based anthropologists and filmmakers. This was soon followed by institutions like the Society for the Anthropology of Visual Communication in the 1970s and the Society for Visual Anthropology in the mid-1980s (Ruby 2001). At Temple, Penn, USC, and NYU, people like Sol Worth, Timothy Asch, Jay Ruby, and Faye Ginsburg further institutionalized the pedagogical purchase of this burgeoning field and its pressing questions (Ginsburg 1994, 1996; Prins and Ruby 2001). How can visual matter (found in the field or created by the fieldworker) tell stories about the cultural other? How truthful and scientifically useful will such stories be? Visual anthropologists attempt to answer these questions by examining the processes behind the productions, placing mass

media texts in the context of social mediation itself (Ginsburg et al. 2002). A film becomes read not only as a particular story about the social world but also as a text occupying an extradiegetic and profilmic space, another cultural character in a larger ethnographic tale about the wider social world of which that film is a part. This marks a move from what some might think of as mere “ethnographic film” to more substantive engagement with (and examination of) the cross-fertilizing links between “media and culture” (Ginsburg 1994).

Here, too, in visual anthropology, the native has arrived to challenge the legitimacy of conventional ethnographic films and the ethnographers who make them. If anthropologists use films to write stories about the other, what do those projects mean in a contemporary context where relatively cheaper digital video cameras and nonlinear editing systems have made the once-cost-prohibitive practices of the ethnographic filmmaker more feasibly utilized by *others* themselves? With the democratization of video producing comes the increased vibrancy of indigenous filmmaking, but will this lead to a more “participatory cinema” or just an already doomed “bargaining with Mephistopheles” (Ginsburg 1992:361; MacDougall 1975; Ruby 1995; Turner 1992)? Moreover, what do these new media offerings mean for the traditional ethnographic films made by the nonnative anthropologist—mentioned skepticism about that dividing line between native and nonnative notwithstanding? For some, native media making is interpreted as the disqualification of nonnatively produced ethnographic film (Ruby 1995). The ethnographic filmmaker loses all claims to the film/video camera as a tool for writing the other once subalterns have gained the technical skills to speak for themselves through film—and it is implied, to even speak more accurately. This is another point at which the native mirrors the filmic in anthropological epistemology. Both entail assumptions of immediacy: the native anthropologist as direct extension of some native ethos and the film image as realist, transparent index of a concrete, physical world (Morris 1994). There is also a concomitant push for “reverse anthropology” (Diawara 1995a), for the “native” to turn the camera around and create a filmic subject out of the erstwhile ethnographic filmmaker—yet another mechanism for blurring the borders between those two categorical designations.

The influx of more and more indigenous film offerings creates the need for an ethnographic cinema that recognizes the importance of what Faye Ginsburg calls the “parallax effect” (1994) in contemporary visual anthropology. The parallax effect becomes a way to explain how both conventional ethnographic films and indigenous ones can be placed in complementary conversation, taking seriously what they have to say to one another as forms of cultural critique and ethnographic representation. Looking at the same cultural material from slightly different positions creates a more holistic and multidimensional understanding of the world than either vantage point would

produce alone—and, hence, explains the profound value of a parallax effect for the future of visual anthropology.

### TOWARD A RIGOROUS REFLEXIVITY

The parallax effect says that different kinds of subjectivities can tell different kinds of truths about the social world, truths that do not negate one another but, rather, fill in some of each other's unavoidable lacunae. Jeff Himpele (2002) uses Michael Taussig's notion of "mimetic vertigo" to argue that a parallax effect also takes place whenever unwitting anthropologists get "drawn into the projects of other cultural producers" (2002:302). By showing the uncanny similarities between his own anthropological appropriations and the tactical maneuverings of a Bolivian talk show host, he argues that an appreciation of the parallax effect reinforces a need for reflexivity in the dizzying give-and-take of anthropological research.

Ginsburg's "parallax effect" asks for very specific kinds of reflexivity in the collaborative conversations forged between anthropologists and subjects. It is this same call for collaboration and intersubjectivity that is at the thematic center of a recent article on reflexivity penned by two urban ethnographers working in contemporary Chicago, Mary Pattillo-McCoy and Reuben A. Buford May (2000). Even when doing qualitative research in the same place at the same time, these two ethnographers see quite different things in the field—indeed, they see quite different fields. What complicates matters even further is the fact that both of these social scientists would equally be labeled "native" researchers. Both study Black Americans in Chicago and are Black Americans (one from Chicago, the other from a city not more than an hour away). What makes their article so interesting is that Pattillo-McCoy and May show that even with all of their demographic similarities, they still often observe very different things in the field, even during the exact same ethnographic encounters. As with Ginsburg's parallax effect, they attempt to highlight the necessary complementarities of differing ethnographic perspectives—further complicating the native–foreigner dichotomy by showing the importance of divisions within the native category itself. There is never one unproblematic native but, rather, as much variety in the categorical *other* as there are actual *others* themselves.

In their attempt at a critical reflexivity (Ruby 2000), Pattillo-McCoy and May offer demographic differences between the two of them (in terms of gender, class, and even marital status) as explanation for intraracial divergences in their respective ethnographic visions in/of the field. They argue that a determination of one's social standpoint begins to explain one's social viewpoints. This is a quite necessary maneuver, but along with it we might want to provide more "vulnerable" forms of reflexivity, forms crafted a little closer to Himpele's notion of parallax as vertigo. Here, I mean to invoke Ruth Behar's notion of the vulnerable ethnographer whose vulnerability is predicated on a reflexivity that is not reducible to simple social taxono-

mies (1996). Often, when scholars theorize reflexivity, they are making a case for how the social slots into which researchers can be placed shed light on the kinds of pre-suppositions and biases they bring with them to the ethnographic moment. In this context, one's social identities are grocery-listed as a technique for exposing one's ideological cards. If one is writing or filming about race, class, gender, and/or sexuality, it becomes imperative that one reveal one's own particular inhabiting of such categories, especially since such habitation can determine what one will and will not see. However, that is just the beginning (not the end) of the reflexive impulse, of what's important about such self-revelatory maneuvers, of why reflexivity has theoretical and heuristic purchase. To stop there is to come dangerously close to making little more than empty autobiographical gestures. Surely, there are better and worse ways to invoke the "I" (Ruby 2000; Salzman 2002).<sup>5</sup>

Behar's notion of vulnerability says that these same sociological categories into which we fit ourselves can obfuscate as much as they enlighten. And, as such, we are charged to dig deeper, to find out how differently (and maybe even idiosyncratically) we inhabit these overly reified social categories. Reflexivity for Behar is not reducible to easy sociological classification in its final instant. Instead, true reflexivity would trouble the very categories themselves. In this context, marking oneself as Black and a researcher does not simply make one *native* in the context of urban Afro-America; it only provides phenomenological pretext for the fraught social interactions one will necessarily experience in the field. Being a middle-class African American scholar (in Pattillo-McCoy and May's case—as in my own) would not only mean deconstructing notions of "race" that would have it operate as some kind of all-encompassing mechanism for superglueing assumed connections across the material chasm of class differences but also not just axiomatically accepting a certain kind of social alienation from non-middle-class Black informants. It mandates an understanding of how class differences and similarities infuse every moment of the intersubjective ethnographic project—even for Black anthropologists working in Black America. A rigorous reflexivity says that the answers don't come automatically with the admission of one's social location vis-à-vis race, class, gender, and so on, but that such an admission is only a more sophisticated way to begin asking the same important questions about the kinds of knowledge-producing interactions possible out there in the world.

In effect, for the so-called native anthropologist working in film/video, this is an important difference between reflexivity as a kind of double vision and reflexivity as a truly DuBoisian manifestation of "double consciousness" (DuBois 1994; Messerschmidt 1981). While W. E. B. DuBois does not invoke "double-vision" per se, he does use an optical metaphor to ground his psychological point.<sup>6</sup> He talks about the African American being "a seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight" (DuBois 1994:2). That second-sight is similar to what Ginsburg

wants to call a “parallax effect”: It is the ability to see from two different locations at once. For DuBois, the distinction is between black and white, but that color-coded logic quite persuasively mirrors the scopic distance between informant–anthropologist, native filmmaker–nonnative filmmaker, savior–sellout. This DuBoisian twoness makes one’s ethnographic vision more layered and multidimensional. However, superficial invocations of reflexivity are less like DuBoisian double-consciousness-as-doubled vision than they are headache-inducing instances of seeing double—instances predicated on, say, a sharp whack upside one’s head. Seeing double is hardly seeing better—if it is even seeing at all—and a far cry from the kind of social “stereoscopy” (Messerschmidt 1981) talked about by DuBois (although it might still resonate well with Himpelean notions of vertiginous reflexivity). For a truly rigorous reflexivity, simply flashing one’s social categories is not nearly vulnerable enough. There is a difference between vulnerable reflexivities and mechanical ones, differences in levels of self-transparency, differences in methodological rigor (Ruby 1995). Here, distance becomes important in placing space not only between the anthropologist and the cultural other but also between anthropologists and their own presuppositions, especially presuppositions about what critically defines the self in the first place, distinguishing between postpositivisms and truly honest invocations of subjectivity.

A filmic double vision and rigorous reflexivity can emerge out of collaborations between indigenous and conventional ethnographic filmmakers, or it can take place within a singular filmmaker herself. I am thinking here of Fatimah Tobing Rony’s notion of “mobilizing the third eye” (1996: 198) to eschew simplistic zero-sum equations about the categorical difference between objectivity and subjectivity. She instead proposes a model of seeing that looks past such simplistic reifications for moments of practical deconstruction and even small-scale transcendence. Rony uses Zora Neale Hurston’s powerful raw film footage as a prime example of how such “third eyes” operate. This is a way of “showing seeing” (Mitchell 2002) to ourselves so that we can look at how we look at the world—and maybe even craft slightly new ways of spying it. For Ruth Behar, this showing of how we see, this vulnerability born of critical reflexivity, sometimes takes on a kind of psychoanalytic tinge, offering readers a way into Behar’s anthropological self through the return of her own psychological repressions.<sup>7</sup> That may be a degree of psychological reductionism and personal confessionality that others are not up to—and it need not be the only way to think about how we might problematize the self through self-distancing while avoiding solipsistic excesses. Even though they also explicitly liken reflexivity to confession, Jay Ruby and Barbara Myerhoff (1982), Myerhoff and Littman (1983), and Myerhoff (1979) offer it less as ethnographic penance than as a model for scientific rigor, social empathy, and political commitment.

### CONCLUSION: READING AMOS AND ANDREW

During my field research in Harlem from 1995–2003, the visual and the native were both operative as important nodes of ethnographic understanding. I can hardly overstate the extent to which televisual and filmic images informed my readings of Harlem residents, not to mention Harlemites’ readings of one another and of me. To explain what I mean, let me invoke the 1993 Nicholas Cage and Samuel L. Jackson film *Amos and Andrew* as a gateway into an example of the potential for mutually constitutive relations between nativity and visuality.

*Amos and Andrew* is a comedy about a racist American town’s misreading of a Black cultural anthropologist as criminal intruder and their bumbling attempts at rectifying that mistaken assumption. The first time I watched the film, it was in the one-bedroom apartment of a local Harlem resident who offered the film up as her way of clarifying what it meant for me to be a Black cultural anthropologist, the only Black cultural anthropologist she claimed to have ever met. The copy of the tape she had screened for me was important first as an entry into how films are used to communicate both parasocially (between spectators and television characters) and socially (among specific spectators). However, it was also important because of what its actual acquisition can tell us about the local political economy of the visual (as determined by video sales and rentals) in underserved Black communities. At the time, Blockbuster was only beginning to think about making its way into Harlem, and so a community of over 300,000 residents was serviced by smaller local mom-and-pop video providers, often corner groceries and bodegas with videotapes displayed on metal racks behind their check-out counters.

*Amos and Andrew* is an obviously self-conscious play on the *Amos and Andy* radio/television serials of the earlier parts of this century, complete with Nicholas Cage’s provocative blackfaced scenes foregrounding that explicit connection to a show with roots in the minstrelsy tradition. But the profilmic plot thickens. In the absence of Blockbuster and other national video chains, the particular copy of *Amos and Andrew* that I first watched in an informant’s one-bedroom apartment was picked up at a local Harlem institution (a store up the block from Sylvia’s) that is playfully and hyperbolically famous among local residents for having any and all African American (and martial arts) films ever made. These are not official copies, mind you. Instead, they are dubbed versions, complete with dot-matrix-printed titles of each film on the VHS tape’s spine label. Before you purchase your film, the employee pops it into one of the two VCR’s stationed in front of the counter so that you can see the image quality before the monetary transaction takes place. Indeed, part of what defines many urban city streets is the ease with which pedestrians can find such bootlegged and/or stolen copies of all sorts of pop cultural fare—from films to CDs and audio-cassettes to hardcover bestsellers and fake Prada bags, often

sold right on the sidewalk space itself, a sprawling and aggressively commercialized “black public sphere” (Diawara 1995b).

With any talk of visibility and urban ethnography in contemporary Harlem, one must also point out the brick-and-mortar changes to the landscape that are part and parcel of a gentrification process that Nellie Bailey critiques—and, yet, another obvious site for marking mutations in the visual with respect to urban America. This is an Empowerment Zoned context in which storefronts change almost overnight. Stores set up shop and move out the next day—transformations that create a palimpsestial Harlem. Like depressed urban landscapes throughout the United States, one of the most common eyesores is the abandoned and dilapidated building that serves as a site for jumbo, bigger-than-life, Times-Square-style billboard advertisements of everything from hair-care products to hip-hop albums—billboards placed right atop old store signs and darkened apartment windows. I started to take still photos of these spaces in the mid-1990s, chronicling the ironies and oddities of an urban landscape commodification where buildings are more important as backdrops for ads than as residences for potential tenants.

And not only did I take still photographs, I also used a small mini-DV camera to capture video footage during my time in the field. Some of these images were shot for my eyes only, a kind of video field note taking; others were earmarked specifically for future ethnographic film projects. And it was this particular imbrication of the visual and the ethnographic (taking stills and shooting videos in Harlem) that brought home the complicated ways in which certain forms of visibility press one closer to (or farther away from) notions of nativity, to the occupation of a native anthropological positionality. Walking the street with my video camera, I am conspicuously the tourist or, even worse, the carpetbagger: still phenotypically Black but not assumed to unproblematically or preternaturally belong. In the context of contemporary gentrifying forces (and with the Black gentry leading a multiracial residential charge that Nellie and others equate with low-income tenant dislocation), being a tourist of any kind links one to that incoming threat. Hostile questions abound, suspicious stares: “What’cha taking pictures for? Looking to buy something around here?” Such queries are offered less out of pedestrian curiosity than suspicious exasperation. In some ways, one’s native status becomes troubled with such a mobilization of visibility by way of “prosumer” video equipment; a native anthropologist loses the ability to effortlessly blend in. With the video camera around my neck or taking pictures of billboards atop empty buildings on Harlem’s main thoroughfare, I was marked as an outsider. This feeling of outsiderliness vis-à-vis the unfamiliar Harlemites I passed on the street (even in the context of assumed skin-based similarity) was quite palpable.

However, there was a second way of using the video camera that was also operative throughout my time in the field, and it is with this version of the visual-native nexus

that I want to close. Following Rouch’s claims about “shared” anthropological movies produced for the peoples depicted in them, there is another visual and native ethnographic instant wherein one is not being summoned to make an “ethnographic film” for colleagues and a wider audience (or even, per Nellie Bailey’s request, to coproduce an activist documentary for political mobilization), but just to document an important social event for the people being videotaped. This is a more specifically intended audience for those canonical social rituals that anthropologists often emphasize as important sites of socio-cultural production: baptisms, birthday parties, baby showers, music recitals, and dance rehearsals, and so on. In a world where the televisual is an imperative mode for capturing, disseminating, consuming, and mediating all kinds of cultural fare, an informant’s appeal for assistance in recording personal events for his or her own private needs is a quite understandable and frequent request. This is not just making films that equate subjects with audience members. It means making films intended exclusively for the people in them. No fancy editing into an anthropological narrative for professional or popular consumption. Just documentation—for familial memory’s sake, in service to someone else’s attempt at self-archivization.

How many times have I been asked to do just this? Many more times than I can count, with no “ethnographic film” as the final endpoint, just a giving back (through the visual), an obligated reciprocation. I awkwardly stand, say, in the back pew of a local Baptist church, my Canon XL-1 hoisted above my shoulder, while a congregant’s son (and one of my informants) is warmly welcomed into the spiritual fold. Because an invested grandmother is unable to attend, this anthropologist’s shaky footage will be as close as she comes to witnessing the event. I get the request two days before. “Of course,” I say. “It would be my pleasure.” And so I shoot, trying to stay out of the way of peripatetic ushers and deacons, and mothers shuttling crying babies back and forth to the lobby. His grandmother wants the sermon, too, so they get permission for me to shoot that as well. The next day, I transfer the footage to VHS, place a laser-printed label on its spine, and drop it off to the new congregant.<sup>8</sup>

This is a gift with all due Maussian intonations (Mauss 1990), cementing social bonds, redefining and reproducing the limits and contours of community, insisting on reciprocity and interdependence. After all, the first gift was their willingness to trust me with their thoughts and personal stories. “What imposes obligation in the present received and exchanged,” Mauss writes, “is the fact that the thing received is not inactive. Even when it has been abandoned by the giver, it still possesses something of him” (1990:11–12). In this case, the video also “possesses something of” the gift’s receivers, capturing, at the very least, their physical likenesses and, according to some, their very souls. This presents a very different brand of “total prestation,” one where the totality of reciprocity is not just a function of the gift’s ability to simultaneously

implicate all social spheres in the exchange (politics, economics, kinship, religion, etc.) but also its uncanny capacity “to partake in something of the personality of the giver” (Graeber 2001:154) and (with video) of the receiver, too. Such a video gift may possess the filmmaker’s aura but it is also literally the receiver’s image.

And how vulnerable is such a personal gift given to “the other.” What if they don’t like it? What if they can’t use it? What if several of the zooms or tilts or pans or tracking shots destroy the cosmological gravity of the baptismal moment? Or maybe his grandmother just wanted something framed a little differently—to show her friends, to play for her neighbors, to enjoy over the holiday season with family members in from out of town. But in this instance at least, I am simply thanked and told that granny will love it no matter what. This exchange has clear implications for the gift I am getting back in return: a quasifamilial relationship to my informant, to “granny,” to all of them, these people that I *study*. All anthropologists give gifts (as thanks, incentive, or bribe), and they often feel such familiarity and familiarity in return. For the native anthropologist in particular, gifts are also attempts to negotiate informants’ assumptions about community and nativity with respect and generosity.

Of course, that is all even more problematic (maybe rendered somewhat disingenuous) when the anthropologist has asked for and received specific permission to show clips or stills of this same personal footage at talks around the country (or to reference them as part of a published paper for a refereed anthropological journal). If this move (to film something for the people being filmed) can be said to bring me a bit closer (as native) to my own nativity (to mutuality and gifting as a member of an assumed social grouping), my recontextualization of that same material as part of this article is, indeed, the other side of this ethnographic flimflam. My recontextualization becomes an ethnographic *flimflam* that we, as anthropologists, hope might still be ethically sound—if not theoretically helpful. It at least marks what might be imagined (following Marxist theoretical formulations) as a transformation of consumptive emphasis—from the *use-value* of video images (captured for the viewing of those being represented) to their *exchange-value*—replete with surplus symbolic import parlayed into academic capital or film festival awards. As with all gifts, the potential for exploitation is endless.

As a teaching tool, film production is especially useful because of this exploitative potential. By that I mean to say that film is a great tool through which to think about the ethics of participant observation as a methodology—and of ethnographic representation as a discursive and political form. And so it is all the more important for the so-called native anthropologist writing self and other (and thinking self as other) to utilize the technologies of contemporary film and video production toward democratizing ends.

We know that the dichotomy between native and anthropologist is a fundamentally false one; however, it ob-

viously has real productive force. But this is a discursive and practical productivity that comes not only from performances given in front of the camera, not only from cultural representations per se but also as a specific function of the very wielding of video-recording equipment. It is as much about the extradiegetic as the diegetic, as much about profilmic excesses as the filmed proscenium. The question is not just how others represent themselves through their own indigenous film offerings. It is not even reducible to an easy anthropological reversal whereby the perennial subjects make filmic subject matter out of the anthropologist’s cultural landscape. Theorizing the connections between nativity and visibility requires an engagement with the inescapable changes to self and other wrought by film/video as a process that is photochemical/electromagnetic at one end and discursive/performative at the other. We might begin to rewrite nativity and visibility at the crossroads where these two aforementioned ends meet. Bea Medicine puts the possibilities poignantly in her book on native anthropologizing:

I am part of the people of my concern and research interests. Sometimes they teasingly sing Floyd Westerman’s song “Here Comes the Anthropologist” (1969) when I attend Indian Conferences. The ambiguities inherent in these two roles of being an “anthro” while at the same time remaining a “Native” need amplification. They speak to the very heart of “being” and “doing” in anthropology. My desire to be an anthropologist has been my undoing and my rebirth in a very personal way. [2001:3]

The “ambiguities inherent in these two roles of being an ‘anthro’ while at the same time remaining ‘Native’ ” can be interestingly theorized when we use film/video to show us some of how we see—and how others see us seeing them. It provides ways of rethinking nativity through visibility (and vice versa) while at the same time offering the beginnings of a conceptual framework for the construction of more vulnerable and rigorous reflexivities that challenge anthropologists to mobilize their many gifts (third eyes, parallaxing effects, shifting stereoscopies, and inexpensive digital video technologies) to reinvent ethnography in the 21st century. For Nellie Bailey and I, such a lofty goal might start quite simply, with a short video program she wants to broadcast on Manhattan Neighborhood Network some time soon. “Sure,” I say. “I’d love to help.” Win, win? Maybe.

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#### NOTES

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University's Center for Documentary Studies. Deborah Thomas, Karla Slocum, and Lanita Jacobs-Huey each read versions of this piece and provided critically useful commentary—as did the four anonymous AA readers (including the two revealed to be Faye Ginsburg and Carolyn Rouse).

1. Hockings (1995) makes an emic–etic distinction between filmic and written ethnographies, arguing that films are etic and written monographs emic.

2. Anthropologists have often mined the humanities for theoretical frames that might offer useful responses to the reification of scientific experimentalism as the only model for anthropological inquiry (Benson 1993; Clifford 1986; Friedman 2001; Stewart 1996; Stoller 1999).

3. For instance, why do we not think of earlier monographs by the likes of Max Gluckman and Raymond Firth as native anthropological engagements with South Africa and New Zealand respectively? (Augilar 1981:15)

4. This is some of the reason why attempts to theorize and enact the possibility of middle-class betrayal become, at heart, decidedly ethnographic endeavors—and with specific resonance for the professionally trained and labeled native anthropologist. One can read the works of, say, E. Franklin Frazier (1965), C. L. R. James (Grimshaw 1992), and bell hooks (2000) as differently pitched attempts at just such middle-class betrayal.

5. Jay Ruby (2000) claims that reflexivity in anthropology provides for greater methodological rigor—that it makes ethnographic research more scientifically sound, even though he thinks that it has been hijacked by postmodernists.

6. Richard Wright, in *The Outsider*, invokes the notion of “double vision” explicitly and specifically: “[Blacks] are going to be self-conscious; they are going to be gifted with a double vision, for, being Negroes, they are going to be both inside and outside of our culture at the same time” (Wright 1953). Also see Okely 1996 on a different articulation of the “double vision” inherent in native anthropologizing.

7. Some of these same psychologized attempts at reflexivity can return the discussion back to film—specifically, Stan Brakhagian moments when the profilmic becomes the prefilmic, a way to talk about the kinds of “seeing” that purportedly come before discourse and culture (James 1989). In the context of a discussion about “new ethnography,” Goodall calls for a “dialogic vulnerability” (2000:14) that retains an explicit invocation of the intersubjective bases of all ethnographic encounters.

8. As another indication of self-conscious visuality in contemporary America, many Harlem churches are videotaping their own services nowadays—either for sale to congregants or in order to archive sermons for posterity.

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