

**Issues to think about while going through the readings on  
Observation, Participation, and Ethnography (for Info 272 class on Thu 9/9/10)**

**'On Ethnographic Authority'**

The piece titled “On Ethnographic Authority” reviews the history of ethnographic practice:

- How did early ethnographers attempt to establish the scientific validity of their work? What were some of their anxieties and doubts and what strategies, practices, arguments did they use to resolve them?
- What were the key emerging elements of efficient and valid ethnography that emerged in the 1920s as exemplified by anthropologists Mead, Malinowski, and Griaule?

The term ethnography can be broken down etymologically to its literal components: ethno [a peoples/a nation] + graphy [writing]. Ethnographers consider writing to be central to their analytical process. Evolving writing practices have reflected changes in what ethnographers consider to be credible claims and ways of handling the challenge of representing social worlds in text.

- What does Clifford say about the following writing practices – the ethnographic present (use of the present tense), the absolute subject (i.e. “the Nuer” or “the Japanese”), fables of rapport and fieldwork accounts, dialogue and polyphony, the use of quotations.

**In 'Thick description'**

- What makes a description "thick"?
- For Geertz, are thick descriptions "just" descriptions? Are they simultaneously explanations?
- What can a thick description achieve that other forms of research or writing may find difficult to do? What makes such research 'worthwhile'?
- What is the difference between generalizing across cases and generalizing within a case?
- What may be the conceptual or logistical barriers to achieving a thick description of the sort Geertz is talking about?

**In 'Subjectivity in Social Analysis'**

- What is Rosaldo’s criticism of detachment in social analysis? What are the alternatives he suggests with the examples offered by Geertz, Briggs, Kondo, and Fanon?
- What analytical value did Briggs find in her emotional blowup and subsequent ostracism from the Eskimo society she studied?