

KROEBER ANTHROPOLOGICAL
SOCIETY, 100(1): 38-63

Adorno's Dilemma: On Difficult Writing and Sophistication in Anthropology Today¹

Marc Goodwin, University of California, Berkeley

Introduction

Writing in 1966, in an essay entitled "Difficulties," Theodor Adorno saw modern music as, "faced with an alternative," "that between the fetishism of the material and the process, on the one hand, and unfettered chance [in the form of aleatory music] on the other" (2002:660). In other words, after the collapse of tonality in the early twentieth century, composers could choose either to ignore this fact and compose music that could make no claims to being autonomous art, or face complete isolation from musical expressivity. This paper uses Adorno's dilemma as a starting point and central organizing device for exploring the political, ethical, and aesthetic dimensions of debates on "difficult writing" in anthropology. More specifically, for heuristic purposes, it draws a connection between the "crisis of musical meaning" in the early to mid-twentieth century, and the so-called "crisis of representation" in anthropology in the 1980s and 1990s in order to think of the problem of difficulty as a particular response to objective historical conditions. In particular, I argue that the shift to textuality in anthropology created a bifurcation between the epistemological and political dimensions of representation, and introduced sophistication as the key diacritic of critical engagement and inquiry. Because the notion of sophistication implies both technical refinement and deception, I show how criticisms of difficulty in writing imply already a specific notion of failed or inauthentic public address. In the last section of this paper, I consider how anthropology might meet the challenge of difficult writing by creating new conditions for consumption, circulation, and publicity that maintains the first condition of sophistication (technical refinement) while jettisoning the second (deception).

Debates about "Difficult Writing"

In January of 1999, during the last days of the much maligned "culture wars," the journal *Philosophy and Literature* awarded Judith Butler the honorable distinction of being its fourth, and what turned out to be its final, annual Bad Writing Contest winner.² The award prompted a very heated, and very public, exchange about the uses and abuses of difficult writing, and to whom or what academic writing was responsible. In March of that year, Butler posted a reply in the Op-Ed section of *The New York Times*, defending difficult writing as a necessary tool in the fight against social injustice, reasoning that "if common sense sometimes preserves the social status quo, and that status quo sometimes treats unjust social hierarchies as natural, it makes good sense on such occasions to find ways of challenging common sense. Language that takes up this challenge can

help point the way to a more socially just world” (Butler 1999). The majority of the responses to the editor, and to the debate, however, were critical of Butler’s reasoning (Bauerlein 2004).

In perhaps the most notable of these responses, Martha Nussbaum, writing in *The New Republic*, charges that Butler’s writing is merely performative: “[S]ubservient to the oracular voice of [Butler’s] text, and dazzled by its patina of high-concept abstractness, the imagined reader poses few questions, requests no arguments and no clear definitions of terms.” Nussbaum goes on, warning that Butler’s “turgid” prose creates “an aura of importance” and:

bullies the reader into granting that, since one cannot figure out what is going on, there must be something significant going on, some complexity of thought, where in reality there are often familiar or even shopworn notions, addressed too simply and too casually to add any new dimension of understanding.... This obscurity fills the void left by an absence of a real complexity of thought and argument. [1999: 39]

The challenge that Butler’s writing poses demands its own attention and is beyond the scope of this paper (Crowley 2001, and Salih 2003). However, as I am using them here, the heated exchanges surrounding the Bad Writing Contest constitute the culmination and most visible expression of an ongoing debate since the 1980s about both the political and epistemological work academic writing does and toward what ends it should address itself. Within anthropology, these concerns were most pronounced in the debates about language and representation that both shortly prefigured, and then erupted with, the publication of *Writing Culture* in 1986. *Writing Culture*, of course, both marks a seminal event and serves as a convenient placeholder for a broader set of concerns about the ways in which language and writing were put to use in anthropology. Ernst Gellner, who was perhaps the most vocal member of an old guard within these debates, was concerned not simply that difficult writing was bad style *per se*, but that this style introduced a troubling, and artificial, breakdown of anthropological inquiry itself:

This posturing has gone far enough . . . anthropologists . . . parade their real or invited inner qualms and paralysis, using the invocation of the epistemological doubt and cramp as a justification of utmost obscurity and subjectivism (the main stylistic marks of ‘postmodernism’). They agonize so much about their inability to know themselves and the Other, at any level of regress, that they no longer need to trouble too much about the Other. If everything in the world is fragmented and multiform, nothing really resembles anything else, and no one can know another (or himself), and no one can communicate, what is there to do other than express the anguish engendered by this situation in impenetrable prose? [1992:45]

It is easy to dismiss Nussbaum and Gellner’s denunciations as ignorance. Jose Ortega y Gasset articulates this position well in his 1925 essay on modern art when he sug-

gests that “when a man dislikes a work of art, but understands it, he feels superior to it; and there is no reason for indignation. But when his dislike is due to his failure to understand, he feels vaguely humiliated and this rankling sense of inferiority must be counter-balanced by indignant self-assertion.”³ But I think as anthropologists, debates about “difficulty” – specifically, difficult academic writing – deserve our closer attention. Difficult writing cannot simply be dismissed as arrogance or pretentiousness (although, in point of fact, it can be both of those things), but neither should it be uncritically accepted as a necessary marker of sophisticated engagement with the world. As anthropologists we might do well to ask ourselves to what situation, place, or end we see our work going when we write difficultly. What kind of critical work is our writing doing, and for whom do we envision ourselves writing?⁴

Although much of the hostility against so-called “difficult” writing has been directed against academics in “critical studies,” the debate is indicative of the fraught relationships that exist as a whole within the humanities and the American academy more broadly.⁵ Straddling both, the humanities and social sciences, anthropology occupies an interesting, if ambivalent, disciplinary relationship to these debates. The question whether any given piece of anthropology is “bad” or “difficult” is banal and tedious. To be sure, as Gellner’s words above would suggest, many anthropologists have been accused of being difficult writers – for what it’s worth, Stephen A. Tyler was awarded fourth place in the Bad Writing Contest. There are, however, more interesting, important, and critical questions in my mind. For example, why did difficult writing become something of a problem in intellectual discourse over the last twenty years? What difference do these debates make for writing anthropology in particular? And finally, is it possible to write a history of writing in anthropology that uses debates about difficulty to open up new and creative ways of conceiving our relationship to writing today?

Framing the Problem: Adorno and “New Music”

This essay began several years ago as a reflective exercise on the problems and debates about so-called difficult, or bad, writing in the humanities and social sciences over the last two decades and what it meant to try to write thoughtful and critically engaged anthropology within this context. These debates seemed particularly important because, as a graduate student, I was in a critical stage of developing my voice as an anthropologist and author, and was just beginning to grapple with many of the questions about language, style, and intellectual publics both implicit and explicit in the debates over difficulty. As I became more familiar with the subject, it became clear that many of the concerns about difficult writing had already been rehearsed, if in somewhat different terms, with respect to orchestral music since the early to mid-twentieth century. In particular, there was and still exists a concern that orchestral music has become too ‘difficult’ for a general listening audience, that contemporary composers employ a style and aesthetics that alienates all but the most sophisticated and discerning listener, and that as a result, orchestral music is in danger of becoming an isolated, irrelevant, socially aloof, and not to mention, financially untenable art-form.

Theodor Adorno’s writings on music and aesthetic theory, although predating by some years the underlying changes in the academy that prefigured the debates about dif-

ficult writing (the rise of “identity politics” and the popularity of so-called “afterological” approaches like postmodernism and post-structuralism), seem especially productive in thinking through questions of difficulty.⁶ Not only was Adorno cited by Butler and others in her defense as an exemplary model of how difficult prose could provide a viable mode of political engagement (Butler 1999, 2003; Miller 1999; Culler and Lamb 2003), but his own framing of the problem of difficult music sets into clear relief many of the challenges facing anthropologists writing “culture” today.

Adorno himself had studied musical composition in Vienna in the mid-1920s with Alban Berg, and was in contact with other composers from the Second Viennese school, most notably, Arnold Schoenberg and Anton Webern. By that time there was a crisis developing – one might even say accelerating – in modern music. The dissolution of traditional tonality began most significantly with Richard Wagner’s *Tristan and Isolde*, with that now infamous half-diminished seventh chord, and it seemed that by the early twentieth century, traditional tonality had reached its logical limits. Of course, there was still plenty of tonal music being composed in the early twentieth century – *Madama Butterfly* and *Pines of Rome* serve as good examples – but none of this music could claim the title of avant-garde.

Adorno first confronts the issue of difficulty directly in an aptly titled essay, “Why is the New Art So Hard to Understand?,” written in 1931 when he was twenty-eight years old. Here he reformulates more broadly the proposition first raised by Berg in his 1924 essay, “Warum ist Schönbergs Musik so schwer verständlich?” written for Schoenberg’s fiftieth birthday (Adorno 2002:133, fn. 1). Adorno notes that the question, posed “vaguely and generally,” attends not to “art in itself and its concrete form, but [to] the public that finds itself confronted with it.” Thus his question is posed “sociologically, not aesthetically” (127). The average “Philistine,” he observes, complains about “*l’art pour l’art*” – the ultimate sign of “decadence and degeneration” – that signals the “alienation of production from consumption” and inhibits art’s “immediate comprehensibility”; presumably a quality absent in difficult music or art (128). The challenge with this view, he contends, is that it falsely assumes that difficulty stems from the personal whims of the artist. In contrast, Adorno believes the alienation and autonomy of art stem from its “socio-economic development.” Art in the twentieth century has assumed a new function. In contrast to earlier days where art held a religious function, it has now become a commodity to be exchanged. Therefore, the “genesis” of the problem lies in the production of “art itself” (129). This state of affairs leads to a situation where, in order to salvage art from becoming mere *divertissement*, artists, “robbed of all prescribed norms,” are required to invent progressively difficult “solutions” to the problem of art’s consumption. As Adorno reiterates, this situation stems not from the “private intellectual state of mind of the individual artists; nor does the social situation express itself mystically in the incomprehensibility of the works of art. Rather, technical differentiation, and with it the increase in difficulty, derives from the rationalization of the process of artistic production” (129). In other words, the difficulty of new music is not simply or primarily a problem generated by the artists themselves because they have grown bored with older conventions (however much this may be the case). Rather, the difficulty of new music stems from the need to create an artistic language that resists art’s commodification and easy consumption.

Three elements present in this essay remain more or less constant throughout Adorno's treatment of "new music." First, he poses the question of difficulty as a problem that deserves our careful attention and one that cannot and should not be taken for granted or explained away by recourse to older moral vocabularies or common sense. Secondly, this problem is emergent from the dialectical movement of history itself, such that the solutions to this problem must directly confront the conditions of emergence themselves. There are no ready-made answers from history or tradition that can be applied or reapplied to the present situation. Thus, as a quintessentially modern philosopher, Adorno concerns himself with what is really "new" about "new music." Finally, in locating difficulty in the spaces of circulation between production and consumption, Adorno casts the problem of difficulty as one of publics and publicity. These three elements, I contend, are essential for understanding the emergence of difficult writing in the humanities over the last two to three decades, so it is worth being clearer about what Adorno means when he treats difficulty in music as an historical and sociological problem, and what this problem has to do with production and consumption.

History is important for understanding Adorno's critique of music not because Adorno is a historicist in the sense that everything becomes history and history must be understood on its own terms, but because he attempts to think the relationship between music, history, and society as a series of problems. Thinking with Hegel as he often did, these problems are always dialectical, insofar as musical solutions themselves become problems to be addressed. Because new music faces these problems directly, "the distinction between new music and music in general becomes the distinction between good and bad music as such" (1998:268).⁷ Therefore, in Adorno's critique of aesthetics we cannot judge music simply on its own terms; rather music is, or at least good music is, an attempt to come to terms with its own conditions of composition.

In his highly original writings on Beethoven, for example, Adorno shows, with copious musical examples, how Beethoven struggled to develop his own musical language within the context of bourgeois social organization. Early Beethoven compositions – e.g. as in his third symphony in E flat major, "Eroica" – serve as an affirmation of the liberal bourgeois subject where the objective musical form becomes subjective through the creative use of dissonance and the thematization of the musical score. Adorno argues this mirrors the early nineteenth century illusion that there exists an organic relationship between the liberal subject and the objective form of liberal society. Increasingly though, Beethoven breaks with this tradition and develops his own musical language wherein the subjective character of the music itself must be rendered intelligible or listenable through the objectivity of form (Sample 1994). The critical nature of Beethoven's music lies in its increasing autonomy from bourgeois society; in the process of becoming autonomous, Beethoven is forced to develop a new musical language that affords us a new way of perceiving the world. Although it would be interesting to develop this point further with respect to Beethoven, of whom Adorno had a deep appreciation, such a discussion is outside the scope of this paper. Adorno makes this point just as clearly, however, in his discussion of twentieth century orchestral music, in particular the work of Arnold Schoenberg and Igor Stravinsky, in his infamous text *Philosophie der neuen Musik*.

Adorno wrote the bulk of *Philosophie der neuen Musik* (later translated into

English as Philosophy of Modern Music) in the early 1940s while he, like many other prominent and not-so-prominent Jewish German *émigrés*, was an Angeleño-in-residence, camping out in the palm-lined hills and futuristic sprawl of Brentwood and the Pacific Palisades.⁸ Much has been made of Adorno's time in Los Angeles and the sense of alienation and estrangement he felt from his European sensibilities (Jeneman 2007). By this time, Western Europe was struggling to overthrow National Socialism and other authoritarianisms, and in the United States, and particularly in Hollywood, just a few miles to the East of Adorno, capitalism and the culture industry were producing what he saw as vapid and artificial entertainment.⁹ On his account, in both Nazism and Capitalism, the individual, the subjective, and the personal were oppressed by the rational technocratic structures of the modern world (Horkheimer and Adorno 1972; see also Witkin 1998: 17-27). Again, this situation serves not simply as a historical backdrop against which we can better understand twentieth-century music, but as a fundamental condition of possibility: what does it mean to write music between Nazism and Capitalism? Adorno wants us to understand "new music," as more than novelty or a changing of the guard, as it were; just as important is the particular stance it takes towards these problems.

Adorno addresses this situation by giving a careful comparison of two contemporary composers of his day, which correspond to the two organizing sections of *Philosophy of New Music*: "Schoenberg and Progress" and "Stravinsky and Restoration." Schoenberg, who was himself living in exile in Los Angeles during the War, was perhaps the most visible figure of the Second Viennese School, and is often credited with developing atonality as sustained musical project. Though his early works were still identifiably tonal, by the 1920s he began developing a system of "twelve-tone" composition that abandoned tonality completely. Igor Stravinsky, on the other side of Adorno's divide, made a name for himself early in the twentieth century with compositions for ballet like *The Firebird Suite*, *Petrushka*, and, arguably his most noteworthy piece, *The Rite of Spring*. In the 1920s, just as Schoenberg and others were turning to dodecaphonic music, Stravinsky developed his own style of composition called Neo-Classicism, which used Classical forms, styles, and grammars (in the style of Mozart, Haydn, or early Beethoven), but distorted them; frequently through the use of polytonality, chromaticism, and rhythmic juxtaposition.¹⁰ Interestingly enough, Stravinsky turned to twelve-tone composition in the 1950s a decade after *Philosophy of New Music*, which is believed to play some role in the rejection of Stravinsky's Neo-Classicism.¹¹

For the sake of our analysis here, we might say that Adorno chose these two composers because they each represent in their own way, and in contrast to one another, unique approaches to the problem of tonality in the early twentieth century. If composing tonal music was impossible without being merely a collection of trite sentiments or a stubborn adherence to tradition, then what was next? Schoenberg's expressive atonality carried on the tradition of Wagner and Brahms, but at the same time addressed itself to the estranging nature of modernity. For Adorno, the critical function of modern music was to quite literally give voice to the profound sense of alienation, suffering, and loneliness of the modern condition.¹² Adorno saw the earlier work of his mentor, Alban Berg, like his opera *Wozzeck*, and most especially of Arnold Schoenberg, with works like *Pierrot Lunaire* or *Erwartung*, as examples of this musical "progress." While con-

temporary critics often charged that the increasingly anti-aesthetic devices of the Second Viennese School, reduced music to mere “intellectualism,” Adorno believed that the critical potential of this music lay precisely in the fact that it said ‘no’ to any kind of easy consumption, which is what is valued most in consumer capitalism. (Adorno 1973:11-16).

In Adorno’s critical appraisal, whereas Schoenberg’s music represented the “new,” Stravinsky’s savage rhythms and neo-classical structures sought a return to earlier musical and social forms. But Stravinsky wasn’t producing a facsimile of primitivism or classicism, or even ragtime, or jazz from which he also borrowed. What especially troubled Adorno was the “schizophrenic” assembly of these forms that produced a kind of cool, detached, and ironic “objectivism” (see esp. Adorno 1973:171-2). The point for Adorno wasn’t that Schoenberg composed atonal music and Stravinsky composed tonal music. If that were the case, Adorno could have chosen better examples of tonal composers like Rachmaninov or Sibelius, whose works he found not only inadequate but vulgar (Witkin 1998: 146). Rather the important distinction for Adorno was between art and artificiality. The problem with Stravinsky was that he was a representative of modern music, but at the same time his music shared some troubling affinities with jazz and other forms of popular music, of which Adorno was famously critical. Like popular music, Stravinsky’s focus on the rhythmical rather than the lyrical promoted conformity and collectivity over individuality. Furthermore, whereas the critique of modern society was immanent within Schoenberg’s subjective expressivity, Stravinsky’s music “continually directs its gaze towards other materials, which it then ‘consumes’ through the over-exposure of its rigid and mechanical characteristics” (Adorno 1973:183). Adorno, following Rudolf Kollisch, derides this as “music about music.” In this form, “compositional spontaneity itself is overwhelmed by the prohibition placed upon pathos in expression: the subject, which is no longer permitted to state anything about itself, thus actually ceases to engage in ‘production’ and must content itself with the hollow echo of objective musical language, which is no longer its own” (181-2).¹³

“Musical language,” as Adorno calls it, is at the heart of his sociological critique of music because it connects production and consumption. What is important for Adorno is not that one is speaking through music but rather the kind of critical work language is doing. Therefore, one of his central tasks in *Philosophy of New Music* is to inquire under what conditions a musical language is possible that can offer a critique of contemporary society without becoming a commodity itself. Or, as historian and musicologist Max Paddison puts Adorno’s question: “how is it possible to compose autonomous, integrated and consistent musical works in the face of, on the one hand, the disintegration of musical material and, on the other hand, the degeneration of music to ideology as a result of its commodification?” (Paddison 1998: 260). By disintegration of musical material, Paddison is referring to Adorno’s concern with the dissolution of tonality. Adorno argues that although tonality appears to us as the most natural way of listening, as if it were an objective fact of nature, it is in reality an “illusion” (263). New music isn’t simply one solution among many to this problem. If this were the case he would outline a plurality of approaches and talk about each of their merits. Instead, he shows how each composer deals with the problems of his day in a singular way. Though the structure of *Philosophy of New Music* would suggest that Schoenberg represented

the solution to this problem, and although many people read Adorno as saying 'yes' to Schoenberg and 'no' to Stravinsky, a more careful reading shows that Adorno isn't satisfied with either approach. This is Adorno's dilemma: we are trapped in the "dialectic of enlightenment" (see esp. Chua 2006).

The real dangers that underlie the fundamental distinctions that constitute this dialectic of enlightenment and motivate Adorno's philosophy of music – National Socialism, Fascism, Stalinism, and the rise of post-war capitalism – seem far from us today. For the purposes of this paper, I'm not interested in the epiphenomenality of Adorno's musical thought as much as the way he articulates the political and aesthetic dimensions of composition.¹⁴ The way he thinks the problem of difficulty through language has important implications. Musical language entails both technical considerations and modes of address, and again, Adorno wants to treat these aspects of language as historical problems. What is important, though, is not language itself – Adorno explicitly states in "Music, Language, and Composition" that "music is not language" (2002:113) – but rather composition. This raises the question: what is the relationship between writing and musical composition? Adorno answers this question in a remarkably lucid essay, appropriately titled "Difficulties," in which he suggests, following Bertolt Brecht, that "like writing, composition is also linked to objective difficulties the likes of which were scarcely known before; that these difficulties have to do essentially with the position of art in society; and that one cannot escape them by ignoring them" (2002:645).

Earlier in this essay, I argued, or at least implied, that the ensuing debates surrounding Judith Butler's coronation as the Bad Writing Contest winner in 1999 marked an important event that made visible the broader problem of difficult writing in the humanities today. I also suggested that anthropology held and still holds an ambivalent position with respect to these debates, and that questions of difficulty were often raised, if not in entirely explicit language, after the fallout of *Writing Culture*. Following Adorno's lead, I would now like to give closer attention to the historical conditions of emergence of difficulty in anthropological writing with particular emphasis on the so-called "crisis of representation" that played an important role in shaping the boundaries of anthropological discourse in the 1980s and 1990s. As mentioned before, Adorno saw difficulty as a necessary response to the problems that music had set for itself by the early twentieth century. Can we say the same for difficulty in anthropological writing, and if so, under what conditions did difficulty emerge? This line of questioning introduces an interesting, and I think, unique series of terms: anthropology, representation, and difficulty. What is the relationship between these three terms and is it possible, following Adorno, to think this relationship historically?

On Representation, Sophistication, and Publics in Anthropological Writing

In his dealings with an imaginative outcast tile-maker – *Tuhami: Portrait of a Moroccan* (1980) – Vincent Crapanzano finds himself grappling with pressing questions of his day: what really are historical and ethnographic accounts if not taken-for-granted literary constructions? On what grounds is representation of the past or elsewhere possible except through writing? For Crapanzano:

History can be conceived, somewhat too simply to be sure, as the opposite of the fairy tale... This contrast between the fairytale and history suggests, however, that historical texts themselves resemble rather more often the fairytale than history. The historical text [and given the genre he is writing in we can assume, by extension, the ethnographic text], like in all texts, including those concerned with personal history, may be conceived as a verbal objectification of the tension between “reality” . . . and desire. Both “reality” and desire are structured, as is the text itself, by the idiom at the disposal of the author. [6-7]

This preoccupation – and Crapanzano hazards a good deal further – nicely illustrates what James Clifford describes in his introduction to *Writing Culture*, as well as in his essay, “On Ethnographic Authority,” as the critical shift from a visual to a textual, or discursive, “paradigm” that is developing in anthropology by the mid-1980s (1986:12). If for much of the twentieth century the assumed role of the ethnographer was that of participant observer – a task that assumes or asserts what Clifford calls the primacy of the visual (1988:31) – more recent innovations in anthropological inquiry and practice now stressed the importance of language, discourse, and textuality. This shift may not have been unique to anthropology – the diversity of sources in Clifford’s introduction suggests, of course, it was not – but perhaps in no other discipline were these two modes set into sharper relief. Clifford Geertz is a good case in point.

I am not suggesting that Geertz himself ushered in a new era in anthropology; although the case could be made, such a discussion would be outside the scope of my analysis. Rather, for our purposes here, Geertz is interesting because he serves as a point of visibility by illuminating the threshold between the visual and the textual in anthropological writing. More than any of his contemporaries Geertz straddles this transition. His project of “humanizing anthropology,” to use his own phrase, performed two simultaneous functions: first – insofar as humanism assumes a liberal conception of the human figure that uses language and symbols to express subjective emotions, knowledge, and experience – it extends the normal project of anthropological inquiry as representation. Here representation means representing cultures, which are for Geertz, more or less, coherent systems, “webs of experience that [man] himself has spun” (1973: 5). As he once famously noted in his much-celebrated essay “From the Natives’ Point of View,” the point is not to “swim in the stream of [other people’s] experience,” but rather “to figure out what the devil they think they are up to” (1983:58). By this admittedly vague, if somewhat glib, pronouncement, Geertz means that what is anthropologically available is not experience itself, which is always immanent and singular, but rather a set of derivative, or second-order actualities that inhabit a symbolic/cognitive dimension and that exceed their individual articulation. “The ethnographer does not, and, in my opinion, largely cannot, perceive what his informants perceive. What he perceives, and that uncertainly enough, is what they perceive ‘with’ – or ‘by means of’ or ‘through’... or whatever the word should be” (58). Even these abstractions are presumably objects of representation; Geertz is in fact explicit that one represents them through a shrewd balance of “experience-near” and “experience-distant” concepts.

Secondly, at the same time, Geertz’s interpretive anthropology relocated the locus of inquiry away from providing increasingly accurate representations of reality or

a culture (the anthropologist as cartographer) toward a preoccupation with interpreting texts – both cultures-as-texts and ethnographies-as-texts – (the anthropologist as interpretive genius). This turn toward a sophisticated textuality rendered problematic the largely unchallenged norms and taken-for-granted assumptions linking object/subject/text/public since Malinowski (who is obviously a convenient placeholder for this whole tradition). By pointing to the ways that writing had always been central (even if unself-consciously) to anthropology, Geertz unbalanced the standard division of anthropological labor and redistributed methodological concerns so that writing, and thinking about writing, were no longer marginal to fieldwork.

Geertz's writing seems tame by today's standards. Though highly engaging, there is nothing particularly difficult about it, aside from its tendency to string itself along with chains of embedded clauses, and the occasional "adjectival blizzard" as Jonathan Spencer once put it (Spencer 1989:148). At the same time, these embedded clauses are the literary effect of a kind of recursivity that constantly haunts Geertz's writing, which continuously interrupts itself. This interruption takes the form of either addition¹⁵ or subtraction.¹⁶ In the latter case, the interruption has a recursive function and serves as a form of proto-reflexivity that introduces a critical gap between representation and writing. This is essentially what Gellner means, in his aforementioned critique of anthropological writing, by "epistemological doubt and cramp." Here the inquiry bends back on itself and questions itself, not only to clarify or elaborate a particular line of reasoning, but also importantly, to interject itself, and break up the natural flow of reportage. Neither his writing nor his analyses hover very long over a particular thought or interjection, and as a result these interruptions frequently come across as playful rather than a serious form of self-interrogation. Either way, Geertz inaugurates a new critical style that proliferates in 1980s anthropological writing. As the earlier quote from Crapanzano illustrates, "History can be conceived, *somewhat too simply to be sure* ..."

With Geertz we are right at the limit of representation. On the one side his project is still steeped in the tradition of representing cultures as more-or-less self-explanatory things. By that I mean in Geertz's analyses what counts as culture, or a culture, is more-or-less self-evident, though the content and meaning of culture itself is certainly open to interpretation. His concept of thick description, which he famously borrows from Gilbert Ryle (though one could say he certainly made it his own), contains both visual and textual elements. "The culture of a people is an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong" (1973:452). The description here still incorporates the visual, not simply as a metaphor for empiricism, but as a fundamental condition of and for description itself. At the same time what the anthropologist is viewing are texts. Geertz's style of writing, which constantly interrupts itself, and bends back on itself, at moments escapes representation, and gives us an appreciation of what anthropological inquiry was becoming. But Geertz's style is never really difficult because it hovers at this limit; it never completely boils off into non-representation. The configuration between object/subject/text, though interrupted for brief moments, remains largely intact.

What is at stake in this shift from a visual to a textual paradigm in anthropology? What difference does this make for representation? As the discussion of Geertz

indicates, the medium of the text serves as a kind of prism that reflects, and bends, anthropological inquiry back on itself. In the 1980s “reflexivity” becomes a mode of perception that splits representation into two dimensions: the epistemological and the political. Only after the political dimension of representation does the epistemological dimension of representation become the object of sustained attention, reflection, and critique. These dimensions are orthogonal to each other in the sense that they each have their own intelligibility, and yet with textuality they become completely coextensive with one another such that it becomes increasingly difficult to speak about one without the other. On the one hand, politics is everywhere, and on the other, the act of representing is seen as a fundamental condition for politics itself in anthropology.

The epistemological critique of representation is perhaps best illustrated in Paul Rabinow’s “Representations are Social Facts,” which appeared in *Writing Culture*. Rabinow shows how representation becomes historicized particularly in anti-foundationalist and post-structural philosophy. He points to Richard Rorty’s *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* and Michel Foucault’s *The Order of Things*, respectively, as specific examples of this kind of move. Rorty shows how for the ancient Greeks there was no “sharp division between external reality and internal representations” and that this only becomes a problem starting in the seventeenth century with modern philosophy that conceives of a “knowing subject” that becomes a privileged site of reception and perception (1986:235). Foucault, Rabinow argues, takes the argument one step further by showing how representation is not just a problem of philosophy but is crucial to a whole range of domains and practices, e.g. modern biology and the prison (239-240). But what is the connection here to anthropology, and how is the epistemological tied to the political in anthropological writing?

Talal Asad poses this question indirectly when he asks, “how and when [was the] notion of culture...transformed into the notion of a *text*” (1986:141). Drawing upon examples from eminent anthropologists such as Geoffrey Lienhardt, Max Gluckman, Edmund Leach, and most notably Ernst Gellner, Asad shows how the concept and practice of translation – translating the representations, beliefs, and practices of one culture into that of another (usually the anthropologist’s) – emerged quite independently of other paradigms in anthropological thought, to become one of Anglo-American anthropology’s “central task[s]” by the mid-twentieth century (142). Asad sees this metaphor of translation as problematic because of what he takes to be a fundamental “inequality of languages” inherent in the “asymmetrical tendencies and pressures in the languages of dominated and dominant societies” (164). For Asad translation is made possible not only because it provides easy answers to “complex cultural questions” but also because the project of translation itself is proliferated by an intellectual “style” that is easily consumed, digested, and reproduced. “Apart from being easy to teach and to imitate, this style must surely be at a premium in an established university discipline that aspires to *standards* of scientific objectivity. Is the popularity of this style then, not a reflection of the kind of pedagogic institution we inhabit” (164)? Asad’s line of reasoning here nicely illustrates how concerns about the political dimension of representation in writing raise the question of circulation and intellectual publics.

The epistemological and political concerns over representation in the 1980s culminated with the heated exchanges surrounding Roy D’Andrade’s polemic “Mor-

al Models in Anthropology” published in *Current Anthropology* in 1995. This debate makes apparent how successful the *Writing Culture* generation was in deflating scientism and just how far the center of gravity of anthropological research had shifted within cultural anthropology. Rejoinders to D’Andrade’s exasperation at what he perceived to be the collapsing of any last vestige of reason, and one might say, reasonableness, in anthropology, pointed to the critical importance of language and writing to what was emerging as a new ethics of anthropological engagement.

To briefly summarize, it is through writing, and in the anthropological text, that the epistemological and the political come together as problems of representation. Furthermore, writing as an intentional activity already implies a model of communicability that distinguishes between the writer and his or her public. As in Adorno’s dilemma, difficulty erupts not simply as the result of the personal whims of academics, secure in their tenure, but instead as a seemingly inevitable response to a particular, and one might even say sudden, situation where the primary mode of inquiry and knowledge production in the form of representation becomes increasingly problematized (as does its main object of analysis and central concept in the form of culture). At the same time, a greater awareness and caution emerges about the ways that anthropological writing has been consumed and used toward certain ends, (anthropological self-critiques of aiding and abetting colonial governance serve as a good example). What develops in this situation is a “crisis of representation.” As Marcus and Fischer write in *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* – both capturing the spirit of this malaise and setting it into further motion –

the only way to an accurate view and confident knowledge of the world is through a sophisticated epistemology that takes full account of intractable contradiction, paradox, irony, and uncertainty in the explanation of human activities. This seems to be the spirit of the developing responses across the disciplines to what we described as a contemporary crisis of representation. [1986:15]

I want to flag this notion of “sophistication” because I think it nicely captures the duality of difficulty in anthropological writing. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, sophistication has essentially two meanings. On the one hand, it means “the property or condition (of a thing) of being highly developed or complicated; technical refinement.” On the other, though, it can mean a “disingenuous alteration or perversion of something” or “deceptive modification.” This second definition derives from the practice of sophistry in ancient Greece, a rhetorical practice that employs “specious but fallacious reasoning” and “arguments which are intentionally deceptive.” As such, a sophist might use not only their wisdom about a subject but also “cunning, trickery,” and “craft” as tools of persuasion. This is Nussbaum’s explicit criticism of Butler when she accuses her of “bullying” her readers into submission: “Butler gains prestige in the literary world by being a philosopher; many admirers associate her manner of writing with philosophical profundity. But one should ask whether it belongs to the philosophical tradition at all, rather than to the closely related but adversarial traditions of sophistry and rhetoric” (1999: 39-40). In contrast she cites David Hume as someone who “re-

spects the reader's intelligence, even at the cost of exposing his own uncertainty" (40). Hume's writing, of course, meets one requirement for sophistication, namely technical complexity and refinement, but ostensibly lacks the cunning associated with sophistry.

One might question though, whether this kind of writing that puts a premium on clarity and respecting the reader's intelligence, doesn't already assume a convenient notion of readership in a public sphere as a space of rational and critical discourse. As Adorno, and later others, most notably Jürgen Habermas in his book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, have argued, these conditions of circulation no longer exist as such. Though this kind of space of reason existed in the form of a republic of letters in the eighteenth century, the rise of consumer capitalism, and the commodification of knowledge have rendered this style of circulation untenable. Adorno, in particular, believed that under such circumstances, the purpose of music and art is not to gain wide acceptance but rather to assume a critical function where "the task of music as art . . . enters into a parallel relationship to the task of social theory. . . It fulfills [this] social function more precisely when it presents social problems through its own material and according to its own formal laws" (2002:393). Or, as Herbert Marcuse, another member of the Frankfurt School, puts this same idea in his book, *The Aesthetic Dimension*: "the encounter with the truth of art happens in the estranging language and images which make perceptible, visible, and audible that which is no longer, or not yet, perceived, said, and heard in everyday life" (1978:72).

Can difficult writing be said to have the same estranging function as art? The notion of "defamiliarization" – which along with contextualization has been a central project of cultural anthropology (American anthropologists like Benedict and Mead saw the concept and practice of cultural relativism as performing this task) – carries similar but often less critical meanings as "estrangement" does in the aesthetic theories of Adorno and Marcuse. In *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*, Marcus and Fischer outline what they see as two modes of "defamiliarization" operating in anthropological critiques of contemporary Euro-American culture: defamiliarization by epistemological critique, and defamiliarization by cross-cultural juxtaposition (137-168). The latter, they argue, often takes the form of the anthropological veto (as most visible in Margaret Mead's critique of American "adolescence" by way of an ethnographic study of Samoan girls). Marcus and Fischer see this kind of critique as by its nature "more explicitly empirical and less subtle than defamiliarization by epistemological critique," which turns anthropological analysis back on itself so that anthropologists can interrogate the very conditions of thought, perception, and action that make anthropology possible in the first place (138). Not surprisingly, they choose Geertz as one paradigmatic figure who employs this latter kind of critique, but they see his epistemological critique as acting reflexively; not through an attention to writing itself, but rather through the act of "repatriation," whereby "the ethnographer tries to generalize what he has learned epistemologically by expanding the import of [the ethnographic analysis] in a foreign culture to the conditions of knowledge in his own home culture" (145). Thus for Geertz, Balinese theatre in the nineteenth century sheds critical light onto politics in the twentieth century United States. Marcus and Fischer also point to a "stronger," more "promising" form of epistemological critique emerging by the 1980s with the rise of subfields like science studies, critical legal studies, and critical medical anthropology, and they

see them as performing three kinds of important work: “the critique of ideologies in action, the critique of social-science approaches, and the identification of de facto or explicit critiques ‘out there’ in society, among ethnographic subjects themselves” (156). In both modes of defamiliarization – through cross-cultural comparison, and through epistemological critique – distance (cultural, spatio-temporal, epistemological) plays a productive role in unblocking or interrupting common sense, accepted wisdom, and – in the case of the “strong” form of epistemological critique – knowledge.

To be sure, as Marcus and Fischer note, by the 1980s “cultural criticism” had become a “self-conscious or de facto justification for research” (117). And yet by Adorno’s standards, neither of these modes of defamiliarization can fulfill the important task of social criticism the same way art or music can. In both cross-cultural and epistemological critiques “distance” is a rhetorical artifice that objectifies culture, ideology, knowledge, etc. Adorno saw distance as an inadequate response to the collapse of musical meaning because the subject was already alienated from itself in an age of authoritarianism and commodity fetishism, and this is why he took such issue with Stravinsky’s compositional style which defamiliarized everyday “vulgar” musical forms by creating distance between the music and listener through the clever use of tonal and rhythmic devices. As a twentieth century composer, Stravinsky recognized the impossibility of composing traditionally tonal music and his response, for a time anyway, was to objectify this breakdown in musical language itself. Adorno, however, saw the need to create or rework musical language completely, hence his sympathy for the experimental works of composers like Schoenberg, Berg, Webern, and Stockhausen.

Similarly, as the title and main thrust of Marcus and Fischer’s text indicate, the 1980s constituted an “experimental moment in the human sciences,” and in addition to the two modes of cultural critique mentioned above, the authors attend to new and different styles of ethnographic writing. Vincent Crapanzano’s aforementioned work *Tuhami*, for example, was taken as a paradigmatic experimental text that challenged many of the basic norms and forms of ethnographic writing. By giving extended attention to one main informant, who is largely socially marginalized, Crapanzano’s methods make no claim to representativeness, which was foundational to anthropology specifically and the social sciences more generally. Rather than attempting to represent life “among the Moroccans,” as it were, Crapanzano instead uses his interactions with Tuhami as a way of confronting the broader and, at the time, more pressing problem of authorial and ethnographic attribution. In particular, he draws upon dialogical modes of presentation that interrupt and draw attention to the unstable relationship between an informant’s speech and the ethnographer’s subsequent writing, which until the 1970s was largely taken for granted as a linear and unidirectional process. As Marcus and Fischer note,

Tuhami is difficult not only because [it] is a highly complex subject, but also because the material on which it is based is highly edited. It is as if the author were not quite certain whether he wanted to present the reader with an analogue of the kind of puzzlement he himself had to face in deciphering Tuhami’s discourse, or whether he wanted to present a faithful transcript of what that discourse was like in elicitation – that is, the text itself resembles the fragmentary nature of the series of interactions that it describes. The former

case would be a step beyond the traditional realist conventions of ethnography, a quite different use of this genre for the evocation of a reality rather than for its direct representation. [1986:72]

Thus, by the 1980s, difficult writing had inaugurated a new kind of defamiliarization in anthropology that challenged not only Western epistemologies but also the convenient relationship between object, subject, and text that enabled ethnographic representation as a viable mode of cultural critique in the first place.

We might ask, however, as Michael Warner does in his essay “Styles of Intellectual Publics,” “defamiliarization for whom?” “[I]s difficulty a virtue in itself, or an effective strategy for defamiliarizing common sense? To defend academic writing on such grounds is to assume that defamiliarization works all by itself” (2002:141-2). Warner’s nagging question “for whom?” pushes us, as Adorno did, to consider difficulty as a problem of production, consumption, and circulation. For Warner, to write or speak is to address an imaginary public, a “virtual” space of discourse brought into being by discourse. At stake in writing, and especially difficult writing, are the limits of this public. On his account, Adorno and Butler, (though we might well include much of critical anthropology, which supposedly speaks “from the margins”) write not for a “dominant” public, but a “counterpublic,” which, “maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status” (119). Critics of difficult writing frequently appeal to the notion of a public, like civil society, which we all share and are responsible to. Nussbaum, for example, dismisses Butler’s “pessimistic erotic anthropology,” that thinks it can change the world through “subversive gestures,” because it does nothing to help the “public good” (1999: 37-45, *passim*).

In the beginning of his much-celebrated essay, “Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism,” Richard Rorty notes that: “it is not clear that those who thus marginalize themselves [he means the literary and artistic avant-garde] can be criticized for social irresponsibility. One cannot be irresponsible toward a community of which one does not think oneself a member.” “Otherwise,” he wryly notes, “runaway slaves and tunnelers under the Berlin Wall would be irresponsible” (1991:197). Rorty here makes a case for something akin to Warner’s notion of counterpublics, but at the same time he feels that the political culture of liberalism by its definition makes adequate space for a plurality of counterpublics. To assume an oppositional or adversarial stance through sophisticated academic writing simply means to exercise one’s right and duty within the confines of liberalism. At the same time he doesn’t think the “over-theoretical and over-philosophical form this [opposition] is currently taking is of much use”; and, like Nussbaum, he doesn’t see philosophy or literary studies having any direct impact, only a “long-term, atmospheric, indirect” impact (16).

Warner’s concept of counterpublics goes beyond Rorty’s notion of pluralism by thinking publicity as a problem of *time*. In particular, intellectual counterpublics operate on a temporality that is incongruent with the news headline. Hence Marcuse’s idea that critical art, and by extension, philosophy, is oriented towards the “not yet.” To write oppositionally, then, is to write for some imagined future, or at the very least, to create a space of discourse that doesn’t partake in a logic of consumerism and instant gratification. As Guyatri Spivak notes, books are

being trivialized into just information-command, until even that is no longer pertinent. So, therefore, let us at least, if we are going to engage in that archaic activity, let us insist it be what it can be—that instrument that goes at a slower speed in a world where speed seems to be of the essence. That's what a book is. It is archaic, must remain residual, can become alternative and oppositional because it is a defective form—a virtual enclave in which people can think. [Murray 2003:186-7]

The challenge though, as Warner notes, is that “between the academy and the mass, between the disciplines and journalism, the conditions for public circulation [for critical academic writing] do not for the most part now exist” (2002:149). In the last section of this paper I consider how anthropology in particular might create new conditions of circulation that maintain the technical refinement of sophisticated writing and move beyond the political dimension inherent in the project of representation.

Where We Are Today: What Difference Does Difficulty Make?

In particular, the reason to think with Adorno on the subject of difficulty is that with his philosophy of musical aesthetics we can recognize, or at least reasonably argue, that difficulty isn't fundamental in itself. Rather what are fundamental are the conditions of, or the conditions out of which, difficulty emerges. For Adorno these conditions were, as previously mentioned, the collapse of tonality as musical language on the one hand, and the commodification and consumption of music on the other. For anthropology, I suggested, the shift to textuality created a bifurcation between the epistemological and political dimensions of representation and both became objects of concern and sustained reflection. This took the form of difficult writing because of the discipline's adoption of sophistication as the key diacritic of critically engaged anthropology. Treating difficulty as a unique response to a set of objective historical problems allows us to respond to critics of difficult writing like Gellner and Nussbaum, along with the editors at *Philosophy and Literature*, who conceive of difficult writing as merely an aesthetic choice or style that substitutes rigorous thought for hollow social engagement.

At the same time these criticisms are not without their merits. By attending to the conditions of production and consumption of anthropological writing, we can go beyond what difficult writing is – which, if you remember, I suggested was a tedious question in itself – and instead ask: what has difficulty become or what is it becoming? Even by the time of *Philosophy of New Music*, Adorno was lamenting the way atonality was proliferating as an empty gesture that assumed the posture of the new, but was in fact, a mere replication of technique. His philosophy which distinguished between art and artificiality, and essence and appearance, allowed him to make sharp distinctions not only between serious music and vulgar music, but also between serious and vulgar ways of consuming or appreciating music as a form of art. This is why it was meaningless to listen to Beethoven over the radio; through this medium and at this time, the truly radical character of Beethoven's musical language is completely impotent to change the world. The distinction between essence and appearance also allowed him to take

aim at music that appropriated the technical style of new music – namely twelve-tone composition – but lacked its inner character. Although, unlike Adorno, I don't think the division between art and artificiality or essence and appearance carries any ontological validity, these distinctions, nevertheless, are practically meaningful with respect to the question of difficult writing.

Earlier I suggested that Geertz occupied an important position in anthropology because he was influential in inaugurating a new kind of anthropological figure; there is a shift in the figure of anthropologist as cartographer to that of the anthropologist as interpretive genius. This shift seems improbable without the increasing value placed on the quality of sophistication. With the anthropologist as cartographer – a phrase that Geertz himself uses in *Works and Lives: Anthropologist as Author* (1988) – there is something that the anthropologist is responsible to, like the truth, or perhaps more traditionally, and by Geertz's time more ironically, "the natives' point of view." But by its definition genius is not something that can be replicated. In other disciplines, particularly in the natural sciences, the norms for adjudicating truth claims are generally more open and agreed upon (though this itself implies a kind a tyranny). In humanistic anthropology sophistication – which implies disguise, alteration, or deception – forestalls, *or at least renders more difficult*, the possibility of appraising the truth value of any given piece of writing. Nussbaum, as you'll recall, charges that Butler's "turgid prose" creates an "aura of importance" that "bullies" the reader into thinking that they are witnessing some great profundity of thought.

And although genius cannot be replicated, its style can. What has emerged then is the proliferation of the "performance of erudition" where styles of difficulty become the norm in critical anthropological writing, and, it should be added, speaking.¹⁷ Exuding sophistication, these styles have the necessary conditions of refinement and of an agonistic relationship to a dominant truth or public, but whether any given piece of writing is sufficiently sophisticated is more difficult to judge. In a now, not-so-recent opinion piece in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, "Here's the Problem With Being So 'Smart,'" Jeffrey Williams contends that, in literary studies anyway, the watchword in the last ten to twenty years has changed from "rigor" to "smartness." "Without overarching criteria that scholars can agree upon," Williams argues, "the value has shifted to the strikingness of a particular critical effort. We aim to make smart surmises among a plurality of studies of culture." This mirrors, he suggests, the neo-liberalization (my word, not his) of higher education. Given the free-market conditions that now govern funding decisions and academic publishing, academics, particularly in economically marginal departments (mainly within the humanities and humanistic social sciences), have been forced to become more entrepreneurial to survive. Therefore, we might suggest, borrowing an ecological metaphor, that difficulty, sophistication, and now perhaps, smartness, have flourished in academic writing much like dark peppered-moths thrived in industrial England because of industrial melanism. Although as Williams' observations might indicate, "difficulty" is no longer our problem today, debates about difficulty themselves open the window onto the larger and more vital problem of how anthropology makes itself relevant in the contemporary world.

In the early to mid-1990s the discipline was undergoing something of an identity crisis (Ahmed and Shore 1995; Shore, 1996). This crisis of identity was, of course,

linked in very real ways to the crisis of representation, but it was also part and parcel of three interrelated shifts. First, anthropology abandoned the culture concept just as it was being appropriated by other disciplines (anthropologists now talk about 'politics' and political scientists talk about 'culture'). Secondly, other disciplines added ethnography, or spending time in the "field" in some form or another, to their methodological repertoire (McEachern 1998). Third, other disciplines were crowding anthropology's once unique claim to cosmopolitanism – most importantly, cultural studies (Dominguez 1996; Rosaldo 1995; Wade 1996). The idea that somehow "cultural studies will be the end of anthropology," as the title of the 1996 Manchester debates put it, seems laughably quaint. Globalization gave anthropology a shot in the arm in the 1990s, and in the end it was the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham that folded in 2002. Cultural Studies, or something greater beyond, however, exerted a significant gravitational pull on anthropology. Departments split – most famously, Stanford in 1998 – and realigned. What we have now on the other side of the 1980s and 1990s is a discipline radically different from the one that reigned in the previous seven decades from Malinowski to Geertz.

To return to Adorno's dilemma, it was clear that the "crisis of musical meaning" was something of a point of no return for "serious" composers in the early to mid-twentieth century, and I think the same can be said for anthropology's "crisis of representation." For Adorno, as you'll recall, the "difficulties" engendered by this crisis, are real, irrevocable; "one cannot escape them by ignoring them" (2002:645). At the same time Adorno felt trapped by the increasing reification of musical language in the form of serialism on the one hand, and the "synthetic illiteracy" of the culture industry on the other. To some extent, anthropology avoided this challenge by focusing on globalization, which allowed anthropologists to study problems, rather than represent people or cultures. Even still, the conditions of circulation for anthropological writing seem confined to small academic circles where the value of writing is often (but by no means always) defined by its sophistication and how it markets itself in a "star system," or, on occasion, to a broader public that still values anthropology for representing other cultures (the US military and multinational corporations serve as receptive audiences for anthropological knowledge). Sophistication has been beneficial for anthropology insofar as it places a premium on technical refinement. At the same time, the discipline needs new and different modes of engaging the world that move us past older static conceptions of publics and publicity and that don't rely on agonistic modes of address or styles of presentation. In other words, is it possible to maintain and develop a rich and complex epistemology that can challenge common sense through careful attention to anthropological issues, problems, and questions while forging new kinds of publics and publicity? What forms might this kind of engagement take?

One form might be friendship. In *Anthropos Today: Reflections on Modern Equipment*, Paul Rabinow, as if acting in prescient response to recent charges of bad writing within the academy, offers the welcoming reminder that "unexpectedly, [this] book addresses the reader as a friend" (2003:1). He locates friendship deep within the roots of humanism, taking as his inspiration the opening lines from Peter Sloterdijk's essay, *Rules for the Human Theme Park*: "'Books', the poet Jean Paul once remarked, 'are like thick letters to friends.'" According to Sloterdijk, this idea "gracefully captures

the essential nature and function of humanism: the ability to make friends through the medium of writing” (Sloterdijk 1999:7).¹⁸ The idea that rapport rather than agonism or performance should be the starting point for thoughtful and sophisticated academic writing shares an affinity with Rorty’s pragmatist insistence that philosophy is at best a series of “edifying conversations” rather than a metaphysics. And this mode is in direct contradistinction to what Nussbaum considered to be the arrogance of high theory, where the reader-as-spectator is made to bask in the performative glory of the theorist’s grand philosophizing. Friendship may not be a viable or stable academic public but as a mode of address it would certainly dispose of the need for deception.

Another form of engagement for anthropological writing might be collaboration. For the past half-decade or so, Rabinow, his colleagues, and graduate students, have been involved in a project called ARC – Anthropology of the Contemporary Research Collaboratory. According to their mission statement,

ARC creates contemporary equipment for work on collaborative projects and problems in the 21st century... We seek to reimagine and remediate the norms, standards, and mechanisms of critical rectification that make it possible to conduct inquiry. The aim is to contribute to the production of knowledge and tools for thought in a mode of collaboration and care.¹⁹

The notion of collaboration is certainly foreign to a mode of scholarly production that rewards individualism and celebrates academic “stars.” In ARC’s arrangement it forms a new kind of “public” that is neither the public sphere nor a counterpublic. In particular, this mode of collaboration creates a new kind of relationship between expertise and observation. This is significant because, as Michael Warner notes, “expert knowledge is in an important way nonpublic: its authority is external to the discussion. It can be challenged only by other experts, not within the discourse of the public itself” (2002:145).

Rabinow takes up this problem in his recent book, *Marking Time* (2008), wherein he contrasts the figure of the “universal intellectual” – he cites Noam Chomsky – against what Michel Foucault labeled the “specific intellectual”: a person who has very specific technological knowledge useful for a given end – he cites his friend Roger Brent, director of the Molecular Sciences Institute in Berkeley. Rabinow sees his position as neither the Universal nor the specific intellectual. Rather he occupies an “adjacent” position “in close proximity” to his informants; “a space of problems. Of questions” (39). For Rabinow this kind of work, which he captures with the admittedly awkward phrase, *Wissensarbeitsforschung* – which roughly translates as research on, or of, knowledge-work – is a process in which “‘knowledge-things’ are being assembled” by “those producing the authorized claims to knowledge” and by “those seeking to find a form to represent that process” (2003:85). This space of adjacency constitutes a completely new kind of observation and makes possible new kinds of analysis; what Rabinow, following Nikolas Luhman, calls “second-order observation,” that is, “observing observers observing.”

On the one hand, *Wissensarbeitsforschung* is a variety of an anthropology of knowledge and expertise that has been largely influenced by science studies and post-structuralist critiques of epistemology and that has flourished in the last two decades

within the discipline. And yet, on the other hand, unlike many critiques of science in anthropology and related disciplines, Rabinow's mode of critique is not one of "denunciation," to use his own phrase. In other words, the goal of *Wissensarbeitsforschung* is not to unmask science as hegemonic or instrumental, however much it may be both of those things. And although these spaces of collaboration are saturated with power relations and although adjacency does not imply equality, this kind of collaboration is not an example of what Laura Nader (1972) has called "studying up," where the anthropologist sets his or her critical gaze on the operation of more powerful institutions or configurations (in which knowledge and expertise play a central role). Instead, adjacency implies a new ethical and analytical positionality:

I am convinced by my fieldwork experience that there exists a virtual space of adjacency for other genres, other forms. It is a space of objectivity. On the one hand, it is a space of objectivity in the sense of disinterestedness: . . . On the other hand, there is a zone of adjacency in which a kind of objectivity can be made to function simply so as to pique the native's curiosity. That space of objectivity is one in which different constructions of the object are highlighted. Thus, some scientists will appreciate a certain conceptual distance from themselves, an unfamiliar sensibility in their midst, a foreign technicity about their work, echoes of a different conversation in which they figure. [2007:47]

With this adjacent positionality, the anthropologist positions him or herself differently along two different axes with respect to academic writing and intellectual publics. Along one axis – an index of the specificity of knowledge – Rabinow is neither the Universal nor the specific intellectual, which means he makes neither grand truth claims in a sphere of rational discourse nor specific truth claims as many of his expert informants do. Along the other axis – a political-temporal axis – Rabinow is producing neither "Clear English Prose," which is instantly consumable and which he thinks dogs journalistic accounts of science, nor is he producing difficult writing which, according to Warner, addresses itself to future imagined publics or counterpublics. Operating in a collaborative mode, *Wissensarbeitsforschung* needs to grapple with the complexity of knowledge produced in these venues and develop its own "formative" concepts. Thus, unlike journalistic accounts, it is difficult because of its technical refinement, but unlike "difficult" writing, which marks itself off against a dominant public, it is not deceptive.²⁰ Of course, *Wissensarbeitsforschung* is a very particular kind of research that likely doesn't translate well to other kinds of field sites and orientations, and it will be interesting to see if "adjacency", "collaboration", and "care" are concepts and modes of engagement adequate to situations faced by other anthropologists.

Conclusion

Writing in 1960, two to three decades after his initial reflections on New Music, Adorno had tempered his enthusiasm. "It remains open," he suggested, "whether [this] idea of [new] music can be realized in an antagonistic reality, or whether by virtue of its logic it will simply reproduce the contradictions it has inherited..." (1998:262). The same

might be said for difficult writing. Indeed, it is an oft-noted truism that postmodern capitalism has the power to incorporate, reappropriate, and recycle everything, even those elements that seek to undermine its operation. Perhaps nowhere is this more evident in the humanities than in the proliferation of difficult writing as a viable and profitable mode of engagement by the late 1990s.

Today, as George Marcus has noted, anthropological writing is no longer difficult as much as it is “baroque.”²¹ Still, on the other side of the 1980s and 1990s, the challenge for anthropology seems to be this: can it continue to produce meaningful knowledge about the world when the world no longer is a thing that can be represented, and can those who write about the world write in such a way that challenges common sense without, as in Adorno’s dilemma, consigning themselves to becoming “a stranger to everything?” The answer to this challenge may not come from Adorno or even his interlocutors, but answering it seems vital if anthropology is to come to matter again in a world where we all speak a different language.

NOTES

¹ I would like to thank George Marcus, Aihwa Ong, Kevin Karpiak, and Chris Vasantkumar for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

² Butler won for the following sentence:

The move from a structuralist account in which capital is understood to structure social relations in relatively homologous ways to a view of hegemony in which power relations are subject to repetition, convergence and rearticulation brought the question of temporality into the thinking of structure, and marked a shift from a form of Althusserian theory that takes structural totalities as theoretical objects to one in which the insights into the contingent possibility of structure inaugurate a renewed conception of hegemony as bound up with the contingent sites and strategies of the rearticulation of power [Butler 1997: 13]

For more discussion of the 1999 Bad Writing Contest results from the Editor of *Philosophy and Literature*, see (Dutton 1999).

³ Ortega y Gasset (1948: 6-7). In his historiographical analysis of the American Historical profession, Peter Novick uses the above quotation by Ortega to illustrate and frame the sense of indignation that some historians felt in response to the emergence of “subdisciplinary jargon” in the academic writing of History during the 1970s and 1980s (1988: 588).

⁴ These questions seem especially important with recent controversies about, for example, whether anthropologists could or should be involved in U.S. military operations, which have reanimated older debates about the usefulness of anthropological knowledge, the reception of anthropology outside of the academy, and about the political and ethical responsibilities of anthropologists *qua* anthropologists. See (Rhode 2007). I’m also thinking here of controversies like Project Camelot, the Thailand Affair, and other instances where anthropology was used for counterinsurgency. For discussions of the ethical debates surrounding American anthropology since the Vietnam war, see (Faubion 2001; McFate 2005; Price 2000; 2002).

⁵ Interestingly enough, although the Right has certainly been critical of postmodernism in the academy, the substantive debate about difficult writing was contained mainly within the Left.

⁶ Marshall Sahlins borrows the term afterological in his essay, "Waiting for Foucault, Still" (Sahlins 2002).

⁷ As this sentence might indicate, Adorno's musical writings are often considered elitist and snobbish and he is often used as something of a straw man in undergraduate music classes because of this (Baugh 1990; Butler 2003). In a similar vein, it might be tempting to 'contextualize' or 'analyze' Adorno by reducing his critiques of popular music and art to an effect of ideology or power. One obvious way of doing this would be to suggest that he legitimated his elitist worldview (however unselfconsciously) by masking it as a form of critique. But this would miss what is truly radical in Adorno's thinking and it would fail to appreciate what it still can offer us today.

⁸ Although "modern" is one acceptable translation for *neuen*, I follow Adorno throughout this paper in referring to *neuen Musik* as "new music". This is in part because Adorno saw *neuen Musik* not simply as a periodization but a particular kind of response to a problem that continued to plague orchestral music throughout the twentieth century until his death in 1969. For more discussion on this subject see especially his essay "Music and New Music" (Adorno 1998:249-268).

⁹ Adorno's writings on the "culture industry" are among his most widely read. See, (Horkheimer and Adorno 1972).

¹⁰ In the second movement of his Concerto in D for String Orchestra, for example, Stravinsky composes a supremely imperial Classical waltz, except in 4/4 instead of 3/4.

¹¹ Adorno returns to Stravinsky, the later Stravinsky, in his essay "Stravinsky: A Dialectical Portrait" (in Adorno 1998).

¹² Schoenberg's mono-opera *Erwartung*, "Expectation," articulates this position well. As the protagonist laments, "*Alles ferne lebte ich...alles fremd*" ("I lived isolated from everything...a stranger to everything").

¹³ Two important caveats here. First, Adorno was a prolific writer, and to make matters worse, his writing is famously dense. He once remarked, later in life, that "even he who despises jargon is by no means secure from infection by it" (Adorno, 1973, x). Adorno had an astute musical mind and I haven't done much justice to his musical writings in such short a space, but I hope my rough schematic at least gives a sense of how his framing of the dilemma in avant-garde music in the early to mid-twentieth century might still be of value to us today. Secondly, many Adorno scholars are understandably wary of making one-to-one mappings of between Adorno's writings and composers' orchestral compositions; mappings that elide or blur the often unarticulated distinction between "philosophical aesthetics" and "musical poetics." Rather it is more fruitful for our purposes here to examine the congruence between the Adorno's writings on music on the one hand, and the "philosophical horizon outlined by the technical structures" of his musical contemporaries on the other (Borio 2006:41).

¹⁴ The concrete and actual historical connections between twentieth-century orchestral composition and writings in the humanities are beyond the scope of this article. For more on this point, see Leonard Bernstein's Norton Lectures that he delivered at Harvard in 1973.

¹⁵ "To us, science, art, ideology, law, religion, technology, mathematics, even nowadays ethics and epistemology, seem genuine enough genres of cultural expression to lead us to ask (and ask, and ask) to what degree other peoples possess them, and to the degree that they do possess them what form do they take, and given the form they take what light has that to shed on our own versions of them" (Geertz 1983:92).

¹⁶ “This raises some serious problems of verification, all right – or, if ‘verification’ is too strong a word for so soft a science (I, myself, would prefer ‘appraisal’), of how you can tell a better account from a worse one” (1973:16).

¹⁷ Thanks to Marian Swanzy-Parker for making this point clear to me.

¹⁸ Translation mine.

¹⁹ <http://anthropos-lab.net/>

²⁰ Thus for our purposes here, it is important distinguish between the objectivity afforded by adjacency, and the ironic objectivism in Stravinsky’s compositional style that seeks to create an *artificial* distance between musical subject and object. The “foreign technicity” of which Rabinow speaks is not achieved through deceptive modification as it is in the neo-classical style.

²¹ Personal Communication

REFERENCES

Adorno, Theodor

1941 On Popular Music. *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* 9:17-48.

1973 [1948] *Philosophy of Modern Music*. A.G. Mitchell and W.V. Blomster, transl. New York: The Seabury Press.

1998 [1963] *Quasi una Fantasia*. R. Livingstone, transl. London: Verso.

2002 *Essays on Music*. R. Leppert, ed. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Ahmed, Akbar, and Cris Shore

1995 *The Future of Anthropology: Its Relevance to the Contemporary World*. Atlantic Heights, NJ: Athlone Press.

Bauerlein, Mark

2004 Bad Writing’s Back. *Philosophy and Literature* 28(1):180-191.

Baugh, Bruce

1990 Left-Wing Elitism: Adorno on Popular Culture. *Philosophy and Literature* 14(1):65-78.

Borio, Gianmario

2006 Dire Cela, Sans Savoir Quoi: The Question of Meaning in Adorno and the Musical Avant-Garde. *In Apparitions: New Perspectives on Adorno and Twentieth-Century Music*. B. Hoekner, ed. Pp. 41-67. London: Routledge.

Butler, Judith

1997 Further Reflections on Conversations of Our Time. *Diacritics* 27(1): 13-15.

1999 A ‘Bad Writer’ Bites Back [Op-Ed]. *The New York Times*. March 20: A15.

2003 Values of Difficulty. *In Just Being Difficult?: Academic Writing in the Public Arena*. J. Culler and K. Lamb, eds. Pp. 199-215. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.

Chua, Daniel K.L.

2006 Drifting: The Dialectic’s of Adorno’s Philosophy of New Music. *In Apparitions: New Perspectives on Adorno and Twentieth-Century Music*. B. Hoekner, ed. Pp. 1-17. London: Routledge.

Clifford, James

1988 *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-century Ethnography, Literature, and*

- Art. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Clifford, James, George E. Marcus, and School of American Research (Santa Fe N.M.)
1986 *Writing Culture: the Poetics and Politics of Ethnography: a School of American Research Advanced Seminar*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Crowley, Sharon
2001 Judith Butler, Professor of Rhetoric. *JAC -AMES-* 21, Part 1 (2001): 163-167
- Culler, Jonathan, and Kevin Lamb
2003 Introduction: Dressing Up, Dressing Down. *In Just Being Difficult?: Academic Writing in the Public Arena*. J. Culler and K. Lamb, eds. Pp. 1-12. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.
- D'Andrade, Roy
1995 Moral Models in Anthropology. *Current Anthropology* 36(3):399-408.
- Dominguez, Virginia
1996 Disciplining Anthropology. *In Disciplinarity and Dissent in Cultural Studies*. C. Nelson and D.P. Gaonkar, eds. Pp. 37-61. New York: Routledge.
- Dutton, Dennis
1999 The Somewhat Exaggerated Death of Primitive Art. *Philosophy and Literature*. 23(1): 243-255.
- Faubion, James D.
2001 Toward an Anthropology of Ethics: Foucault and the Pedagogies of Autopoiesis. *Representations* 74:83-104.
- Geertz, Clifford
1973 *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. New York: Basic Books.
1983 *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology*. New York: Basic Books.
1988 *Works and Lives: the Anthropologist as Author*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.
- Gellner, Ernest
1992 *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion*. New York: Routledge.
- Habermas, Jürgen
1991 *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: an Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Horkheimer, Max, and Theodor Adorno
1972 *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. New York: The Continuum Publishing Company.
- Jenemann, David
2007 *Adorno in America*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Leppert, Richard
2005 Music "Pushed to the Edge of Existence" (Adorno, Listening, and the Question of Hope). *Cultural Critique* 60:92-133.
- MacClancy, Jeremy
2002 *Exotic No More: Anthropology on the Front Lines*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Marcus, George E., and Dick Cushman
1982 Ethnographies as Texts. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 11:25-69.
- Marcus, George E., and Michael M. Fischer
1986 *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Marcuse, Herbert

- 1978 The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward A Critique of Marxist Aesthetics. Boston: Beacon Press.
- McEachern, Charmaine
1998 A Mutual Interest? Ethnography in Anthropology and Cultural Studies. *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 9(3):251-264.
- Miller, James
2000 Is Bad Writing Necessary? George Orwell, Theodor Adorno, and the Politics of Language. *Lingua Franca*:33-44.
- Murray, Stephen J.
2003 The Politics of the Production of Knowledge: An Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. *In Just Being Difficult?: Academic Writing in the Public Arena*. J. Culler and K. Lamb, eds. Pp. 181-198. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.
- Nader, Laura
1972 Up the Anthropologist – Perspectives Gained from Studying Up. *In Reinventing Anthropology*. D. Hymes, ed. Pp. 284-311. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Novick, Peter
1988 That Noble Dream: The ‘Objectivity Question’ and the American Historical Profession. Cambridge University Press.
- Nussbaum, Martha
1999 The Professor of Parody – the hip defeatism of Judith Butler. *The New Republic*. February 22: 37-45.
- Ortega y Gasset, Jose
1948 The Dehumanization of Art and Other Essays on Art, Culture, and Literature. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Paddison, Max
1998 Adorno’s Aesthetics of Music. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Powell, Larson
2006 Die Zerstörung der Symphonie. *In Apparitions: New Perspectives on Adorno and Twentieth-Century Music*. B. Hoekner, ed. Pp. 131-150. London: Routledge.
- Rabinow, Paul
2003 *Anthropos Today: Reflections on Modern Equipment*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
2008 *Marking Time: On the Anthropology of the Contemporary*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Rabinow, Paul, and Gaymon Bennett
2007 A Diagnostic of Equipmental Platforms. ARC Working Paper No. 9.
- Rorty, Richard
1991 Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers Volume 1. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Rosaldo, Renato
1994 Whose Cultural Studies? *American Anthropologist* 96:524-529.
- Sample, Colin
1994 Adorno on the Musical Language of Beethoven. *Musical Quarterly* 78(2): 378-394.
- Salih, Sara
2003 *The Judith Butler reader*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub.

- Shore, Chris
1996 Anthropology's Identity Crisis: The Politics of Public Image. *Anthropology Today* 12(2):2-5.
- Sloterdijk, Peter
1999 *Regeln für den Menschenpark: ein Antwortscheiben zu Heideggers Brief über den Humanismus*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.
- Smith, Diana
1999 When Ideas Get Lost in Bad Writing. *The New York Times*. February 27: B9.
- Spencer, Jonathan
1989 Anthropology as a Kind of Writing. *Man* 24, new series(1):145-164.
- Wade, Peter
1996 *Cultural Studies Will be the Death of Anthropology*. Manchester, UK: Group Debate in Anthropological Theory.
- Warner, Michael
2002 *Publics and Counterpublics*. New York: Zone Books.
- Williams, Jeffrey
2004 Here's the Problem with Being so Smart. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. December 17: B16.
- Witkin, Robert
1998 *Adorno on Music*. New York: Routledge.