Introduction:
Place and Voice in Anthropological Theory

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The problems of place and voice are vital to anthropological practice and so is the relationship between them. The following set of articles is the result of a symposium on this subject held at the 85th annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association in Philadelphia, in December 1986. The articles by Appadurai, Dresch, Fernandez, Marcus, and Rosaldo are revisions and elaborations of presentations at that symposium. Strathern’s article is based on her responses (as a discussant) to the oral presentations at the symposium, which included one by Paul Friedrich, in addition to the ones published here.

More than with any of the other human sciences, anthropology is based on circumstantial evidence. The circumstances in which the evidence is gathered (those of fieldwork) and the circumstances of the writing up of fieldwork have been much discussed recently and do not need to be revisited here. But it is worth noting that the spatial dimension of this circumstantiality has not been thought about very much. This spatial dimension has many aspects, including the issue of maps and terrains, regions and areas, landscapes and environments, distance and scale, centers and boundaries. The articles in this collection do not by any means deal with all of these issues, though some of them are touched on. What they do focus on is one aspect of the problem of space in anthropology, and that is the problem of place, that is, the problem of the culturally defined locations to which ethnographies refer. Such named locations, which often come to be identified with the groups that inhabit them, constitute the landscape of anthropology, in which the privileged locus is the often unnamed location of the ethnographer. Ethnography thus reflects the circumstantial encounter of the voluntarily displaced anthropologist and the involuntarily localized “other.” One problem that the articles discuss, in their various ways, is the light shed on this circumstantiality by attending to the dimension of place.

When it comes to voice, we face another problem. Much fieldwork is organized talk, and the ethnographic text is the more or less creative imposition of order on the many conversations that lie at the heart of fieldwork. But in fieldwork there is a curious double ventriloquism. While one part of our traditions dictates that we be the transparent medium for the voices of those we encounter in the
field, that we speak for the native point of view, it is equally true that we find in what we hear some of what we have been taught to expect by our own training, reading, and cultural backgrounds. Thus our informants are often made to speak for us. Sometimes, as with Victor Turner and Muchona the Hornet (and often less glamorously for the rest of us), it becomes difficult to say who really speaks for whom. But the problem of voice is a problem of multiplicity as well as a problem of representation. How many voices are concealed beneath the generalizations of reported speech in much ethnography? And how many voices clamor beneath the enquiries and interests of the single ethnographer? How can we construct our voices so that they can represent the diversity of voices we hear in the field? How can we construct in anthropology a dialogue that captures the encounter of our own many voices with the voices we hear and purport to represent? The problem of voice ("speaking for" and "speaking to") intersects with the problem of place (speaking "from" and speaking "of").

The dilemmas of place and voice in the making of anthropological theory are not only those of talking and listening, but are also those of reading and writing, for part of the circumstantial context of ethnography is the historical conjuncture of previous writing within which it always takes place. Our dialogue is not just a dialogue "in the field," between self and other, but it is also a dialogue over time between anthropological texts and their ever-changing readings. Part of this practical history is known and conscious. Other parts are more subterranean, and several of the essays in this collection take us into these less understood relationships between us and our many anthropological pasts. It is partly for this reason that this symposium on place and voice is not wholly devoted to linguistic or textual matters, but ranges rather freely over broader conceptual and discursive ground, talking of images as well as of concepts, of tropes as well as of traditions.

James Fernandez’s essay commences with a meditation on the problem of how parts of places are made to stand for all of them, and of how this is especially true of the southern parts of many countries and regions. This leads him into a detailed analysis of a poetic duel in late 19th-century Spain. The two voices in this debate argue over the respective virtues of Andalusia and Asturias, and in the process arrive at what Fernandez calls "complementary place": a rhetoric of place in which difference is treated as a proper part of the relationship between one place and another. Drawing on Aristotle’s distinction between "proper places" and "common places," Fernandez notes that "a great deal of anthropological effort—perhaps all of it—lies in training ourselves and our readers to move from common places to proper places in the study of others in other places." While the poetic debate he discusses can be read as an exercise in "contrastive place" (whereby a place can only be seen as contrastive with some other place, typically our own), Fernandez is able to show that the style of the debate moves toward what he calls "complementary place," that is, a sense of the impossibility of defining the human condition without taking into account the contribution of every place.

This author’s essay takes the reverse interpretive strategy and argues that ideas that become metonymous representations of particular places themselves
have a spatial history in the evolving discourse of anthropology. In the analysis of the idea of hierarchy as Dumont represents it, I show that the components of this idea reflect the journeys to India of images that had their origins in a great diversity of other places, including Fiji, Ceylon, ancient Arabia, and Nilotic Africa. I further suggest that those ideas that most stubbornly link places and cultural themes in anthropology all capture “internal” realities in terms that serve the discursive needs of “general” theory in the metropolis. The essay concludes with the suggestion that a polythetic approach to comparison would discourage us from thinking of places as constituted by “natives,” since multiple chains of resemblance would link places, thus obliterating any single cultural boundary between them.

Like my essay, Dresch’s investigates the historical process whereby images from one place begin to dominate pictures of another. In reexamining the relationship between the Middle East and Africa in the history of anthropology, he is able to remind us that the recent domination of African models in the interpretation of Middle Eastern segmentary forms reverses the earlier relationship, since Evans-Pritchard’s understanding of the Nuer had drawn heavily on Robertson Smith’s picture of ancient Semitic society. What this analysis leads Dresch to suggest is that our ability to transcend fake generalization on the one hand and promiscuous particularism on the other depends on our awareness of the ways in which general concepts have illuminated the traditions within which they work. Thus, what worries me about the power of gatekeeping images and concepts such as hierarchy and segmentation is for Dresch grounds for optimism. He suggests that these master concepts can serve as points of refraction, “in which the only privileged point is the point of refraction, which has to it no cultural substance whatever.” It is this kind of refraction, in regard to different cultures, different images within a culture, or different works within anthropology, which Dresch believes will allow a voice of its own for anthropology, “a voice that is not necessarily tied to place in a way that debilitates reason, nor bound necessarily to echo the voice of metropolitan fantasy.”

Such refraction takes a very different form in George Marcus’s essay, in which he is concerned with the manner in which certain ethnographies become canonized because they are textualizations of powerful ethnographic images and narratives. By focusing on the parodic mode in Sahlins’s way of writing structuralist history and on the parodic mode in Polynesian culture, Marcus is able to suggest that the fit between them is “as coincidental as the timing of Captain Cook’s arrival in Hawaii during the Makahiki Festival.” The question, as Marcus concludes, is how this sort of structuralist history, as a rhetorical rather than a theorizing mode, might work when the society to which it is applied does not privilege the parodic as Polynesians apparently do. Here we touch on the problem of the degree to which the classics of ethnography are in part products of complex conjunctures of style, sensibility, and mood between the ethnographer and the society he or she encounters.

Renato Rosaldo explores in his essay those zones of “cultural invisibility” that pose special problems for the anthropological concept of culture. By juxta
posing the cultural stratification of the Philippines with the current cultural complexities of immigration in the United States, Rosaldo is able to show that “if a social hierarchy’s top and bottom appear to be zones of ‘zero degree’ culture, so too is the zone of immigration, or the site where individuals move between the two national spaces.” Rosaldo is thus able to make an impassioned plea for serious attention to the border, conceived as a zone between stable places, since “most metropolitan typifications suppress, exclude, even repress border zones.” As with the voices of debate in 19th-century Spain, and Marcus’s characterization of the Polynesian inclination to parody, so Rosaldo’s immigrant voices are tinged with irony, caught as they are in mid-air, trapeze artists swinging between cultural spaces.

Marilyn Strathern’s polyphonic essay is to the essays in this volume as the essays themselves strive to be in relation to their own subject matters. Drawing on the many voices she heard at the symposium in Philadelphia, she both represents and interrogates them by suggesting that we should look to the anthropologist to “concretize certain ideas as though they arose from local experience.” The bulk of her provocative essay is taken up with the hidden or internal topography that she regards as the source of the “analytical inventiveness” of anthropologists. Central to her notion of this hidden topography is the interplay between two dualisms. The first she calls dualism through negation (where only those aspects of the other are highlighted that capture something about our own preoccupations), thus discriminating against those concepts from elsewhere that do not “present themselves as candidates for inversion.” On the other hand, there is the dualism of comparison or application of ideas from one place to another. Strathern’s major concern is to promote a view of these concepts (perhaps not so far from Dresch’s notion of refraction) in which we resist the temptation to privilege our own perspectival vision, which renders all other places peripheral to “the central, single observer.”

The essays in this collection themselves represent something of the complexity of the relationships between place and voice that constitute their subject matter. Each of the authors speaks from a particular set of experiences of place, in the sense of the places in which they did their fieldwork; the way in which these places have been construed in the places in which they were trained; and the textual traditions through which they encountered these places and found their own voices. It is therefore inevitable that this collection itself be polyphonic.

Yet, some common preoccupations and commitments do emerge. One is a self-consciousness not just about our practices as fieldworkers or as writers of ethnography, but as practitioners within a learned, textual tradition. Perhaps most explicit in the articles by myself and Dresch, the shared idea seems to be that we encounter places through the prisms of a complicated conversation with our predecessors and their encounters with other places. Fernandez and I converge on the idea of metonymic misrepresentation. Strathern and Dresch, as befits their varieties of English training, are reluctant to turn the encounter of anthropologist and place into a wholly particularist set of conversations, and seek for those points of refraction that might restore the idea of comparison to respectability. Strathern,
like Marcus, is concerned with avoiding the illusion of the panopticon, whereby our own histories and situations are exempt from examination as we gaze across the landscape of our "others." As to the voices of these others, Fernandez, Marcus, and Rosaldo remind us that these, too, can be polyphonic and ironic, not uniform or transparent. Fernandez’s treatment of the debate between the two vernacular Spanish theorists can be taken, in part, as an answer to Rosaldo’s worry that we have not attended to enough other theories about otherness. Rosaldo’s concern about borders and my own critique of the idea of the “native” converge on a discomfort with the idea of bounded cultural units. Finally, Marcus and I share a sense that the encounters of our voices with other places may itself be the product of ironic conjunctures of mood or preoccupation, not necessarily testimony to the powers of our anthropological panopticon.

In spite of some of these overlapping assumptions, this collection can also be taken to open some debates: is Fernandez’s optimism about “complementary place” compatible with my sense of the drive of metropolitan theory to privilege its comparative concerns? Can the point of refraction, which Dresch sees as being constituted of concepts without cultural content, really be seen as such in light of Strathern’s views of our own hidden topographies? If Marcus is right that classics of ethnography emerge where there is a fortuitous encounter between the voice of the ethnographer and the voice of those he or she studies, what does this imply for the study of those zones of cultural invisibility that Rosaldo reminds us about: are they doomed to remain inaudible?

Although none of these essays says so explicitly, the problem of place and voice is ultimately a problem of power. This is, in part, the power involved in the relationship between places, so that until there are as many persons from Papua New Guinea studying Philadelphia as vice versa, the appearance of dialogue conceals the reality of monologue. This is linked to the matter of the power involved in the institutional diversification of anthropology: until anthropology becomes a healthy and thriving national tradition in many places outside the West, it will not be possible to conduct even-handed discussions of the politics of the spatial migration of images and concepts, and the Euro-American panopticon will remain unchallenged. Finally, there is the power involved in representing the voices of others (“speaking for”), since ethnography is by its nature both description and representation. However globally diverse the centers of anthropological theorizing become, there will remain the fact that anthropology survives by its claim to capture other places (and other voices) through its special brand of ventriloquism. It is this claim that needs constant examination in the mode that these essays initiate and exemplify.