Introduction:

Creativity in Anthropology

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This volume on creativity is dedicated to the memory of Victor Turner, an extraordinary ethnographer whose life and work exemplified the creative processes he wrote about with passion and insight. He seriously reformulated earlier theories about the human significance of play and ritual, and he pioneered in developing the concepts of *communitas* and liminality. Turner sought out social situations that enhanced full human encounters and understanding. He found that a range of ritual processes produced transformations that allowed the participants to rework their past and move toward a renewed future. His views of the human condition aspired to universality yet rarely strayed far from the concrete particulars of specific human experiences. He was a consummate ethnographer, and his theoretical writings emerged from and constantly returned to his extended Ndembu field research in central Africa.

In his first book, the classic ethnography *Schism and Continuity in an African Society* (1957), Turner remolded the case history method central to his school of anthropological thought, the Manchester School, by developing the “social drama.” Deliberately theatrical, the social drama used a cast of named characters. Its process of unfolding

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followed characteristic phases: breach, crisis, redressive action, and reintegration or schism. As Turner tells it, the notion of the social drama came to him not in the serious solitude of his study, but in the jocular give-and-take of conversation in a pub. For Turner the most creative human spaces were on the margins or along interstitial zones; these were sites of frolic, play, and joking, as opposed to those of earnest workaday routines. For him—as a person and a theorist—significant human contact and creativity flowed from the margins to the centers more often than the reverse.

In reflecting on human creativity, Turner developed the concepts of *communitas* and liminality (from the Latin *limen*, threshold). The term “communitas” refers to the potential fullness of human encounters, both within and beyond the social group. Human action in its plenitude embraces cruelty and tenderness, rage and compassion. It involves forms of knowing that are at once cognitive, affective, and ethical. Both cerebral and heartfelt, *communitas* allows thought to shape feeling and feeling to inform thought. In its full plenitude, *communitas* encompasses the turbulence of human life as well as the warmth of friendly fellow feeling.

The term “liminality” was first used to refer to transitional states endured by initiates during rites of passage. Liminal states recombine and at times scramble the cultural symbols of workaday life in startling, grotesque, and contradictory ways. Thus a single symbol represents birth and death, a newborn and a corpse in much the manner that initiates exist in a betwixt-and-between state, no longer children and not yet adults. The paradoxes and conundrums that arise in liminal phases force initiates to think again about matters they took for granted. They must reflect on their culture and its conventions. For them, a major reorientation, whether conservative, revolutionary, or somewhere in between, becomes the order of the day.

In his earliest formulation of the concept Turner pointed out that liminality was also a suspended state of awareness. “Liminality,” he said, “may be partly described as a stage of reflection. In it those ideas, sentiments, and facts that had been hitherto for the neophytes bound up in configurations and accepted unthinkingly are, as it were, resolved into their constituents” (1967: 105). In his later work, Turner extended his central concept of liminality from rites of passage to historical periods of upheaval and reorientation. He generalized still further and coined the term “liminoid” to designate modern industrial society’s notion of leisure, as activities set apart from work. Found in many

places, from a soccer match to a pilgrimage, these interstitial zones were always the ground for cultural creativity. Turner's processual notion of accepted configurations, their dissolution into constituent elements, and their subsequent reformulation has proven crucial in setting an agenda for the study of creativity in culture.

In a related vein, Turner's biographical portrait of Muchona, a frail and brilliant Ndembu "doctor" endowed with an especially articulate version of traditional wisdom, provides a moving example of the complex relationship between ethnographer and subject. "Muchona the Hornet" appeared in a collection edited by Joseph Casagrande (1960: 334–55) in which seasoned anthropologists portrayed their chief informants. Even in this context Turner stands out by refusing to conform to the canons of his day. His portrait of Muchona creates a space that includes a reflective and socially marginal doctor, an astute and hardened politician, and an Anglicized school teacher named Windson. Educated in a mission school, estranged from his traditions, and troubled by the colonial presence, Windson embodies the jarring historical transformations that shape the encounter between ethnographer and informant. The world, as Turner was well aware, often refuses to be tidy.

Whether speaking of individuals caught in colonial ruptures or exploring notions of liminality, Turner's work highlights the dialectic of innovation and tradition. He brings together odd juxtapositions, unlikely bedfellows, and interactions impossible to anticipate in more neatly compartmentalized theoretical projects. Muchona the man of wisdom, Windson the school teacher, and Turner the ethnographer share overlapping biographies, influencing and being influenced by one another's lives. In his work and in his life, Turner explored complex processes marked by clashes, moments of communion, spontaneity, and insight. Like his subject matter, his writing displays passion, elegance, and aesthetic form. Turner blazed the trail his successors now follow.

In the present collection, Turner's successors range widely in subject matter and geographical area, yet their unifying debt to an inspiring predecessor appears evident in even an epigrammatic description of their essays (readers who desire a fuller discussion of the volume's papers before reading them should immediately turn to Edward Bruner's fine epilogue). James Fernandez describes how Ceperino Suárez uses his poems to play both lovingly and critically, upon village life as he lives it in the mountains of Asturias, Spain. Kirin

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Narayan tells of Swamiji, a Hindu Guru in India, who whimsically reshapes a traditional story so that it comments on contemporary Gurus who offer instant experiences of God, for a goodly fee. Writing about the !Kung of southern Africa, Marjorie Shostak draws biographical portraits of Jimmy, a musician, N!ukha, a healer, and Hwan//a, a bead weaver. Barbara Babcock's analysis of transformation in Pueblo Indian pottery of New Mexico shows how an exceptional woman, Helen Cordero, appropriated and literally remolded dominant male discourse by inventing storytelling dolls. Similarly, Anna Tsing provides an account of how the Indonesian woman shaman Induan Hiling used visual art to scramble and reformulate the performances of male shamans. In depicting the lethal conflicts of field research in the Middle East, Smadar Lavie uses narratives to tell how she used traditional Bedouin story forms to provide the Bedouins an idiom for reflecting, in the midst of jolting changes, on their identities. Donald Handelman uses a deceptively traditional scholarly idiom to insert himself as a character in the drama of how Henry Rupert, a Washo shaman of the northwestern United States, plays with anthropologists' descriptions of his identity.

Victor Turner himself becomes a character in this collection when Edith Turner describes the depth of her late husband's play and creative insight during his participation in an Israeli pilgrimage. The Turners' companion on the Israeli pilgrimage, Barbara Myerhoff, describes how the traditional practice of dreaming reveals personal insight and how she dreamed of her death; shortly thereafter, she died. Richard Schechner reflects on his reading and his experience as a theater director to speak of the connections linking creativity, ritual, and violence. In reflexively depicting his teacher Américo Paredes's balladlike study of a ballad among people of Mexican ancestry in south Texas, José Limón invokes a political vision opposed to Anglo-Texan anti-Mexican sentiment. In exploring the human possibilities afforded by a specific social situation, Renato Rosaldo flips through his field notes to tell how Ilongot visiting in northern Luzon, Philippines, eludes structural definition yet enjoys an open-ended quality that reveals a culturally valued sense of improvisation and social grace. In a related vein, E. B. Schieffelin introduces social complexity into his account of a possession ritual among the Kaluli of Papua New Guinea by writing about how the spirits emerge through the interaction of mediums, audience members, and the ethnographer. Drawing their

inspiration from many parts of the world, these papers appear in a succession from relatively individual to more collective creativity.

The authors in this collection broadly define creativity as human activities that transform existing cultural practices in a manner that a community or certain of its members find of value. A range of cultures and individuals regard such transformations as, among other things, insightful, wise, divine, inspirational, productive, or fertile. The activities that induce creativity at times are, as Turner saw them, set apart in special spheres, and at times they are, as contributors to this volume would add, integrated into the mundane arenas of everyday life. This book shows that states of liminality and *communitas* emerge from myriad social contexts; they require less compartmentalization than Turner's initial explorations, which often sought out pure types, seemed to suggest. At once a property of individuals and of social situations, creativity (not unlike laughter) often erupts at unpredictable times and on unexpected occasions.

Creativity, as Roy Wagner (1981) has argued, is always emergent. Members of a society's younger generations always select from, elaborate upon, and transform the traditions they inherit. The healthy perpetuation of cultural traditions requires invention as well as rote repetition. Even decisions to alter nothing received from the past will usually be thwarted because changing circumstances transform the meaning and consequences of dutifully repeated traditional actions. From this perspective, mundane everyday activities become as much the locus of cultural creativity as the arduous ruminations of the lone artist or scientist. In modern societies the succession of generations requires a similar mix of tradition and change. Today's avant-garde, for example, plays a variation on a traditional nineteenth-century romantic theme of bohemian culture. Marginality itself is a cultural category with its own institutional practices and its own space for creative innovation. Creativity often dissolves, or perhaps more precisely redraws, the boundaries of social institutions and cultural patterns.

"Creation," anthropologist Edward Sapir (1924: 418) has aptly written, "is a bending of form to one's will, not the manufacture of form *ex nihilo*." Invention takes place within a field of culturally available possibilities, rather than being without precedent. It is as much a process of selection and recombination as one of thinking anew. Creativity emerges from past traditions and moves beyond them; the

creative persona reshapes traditional forms. The circumstances of creativity admit to contact, borrowing, and conflict. Regarded as a field of creativity, the zones of interaction among and within cultures more nearly resemble the overlapping strands of a rope than separate beads on a string. Similarly the essays in this collection explore the multifaceted juxtapositions of everyday life. They seek less to separate out social sectors (such as kinship, ritual, politics, economy, ecology) than to render intelligible the complexity with which they come together.

Eruptions of creativity within cultural performances comment upon, just as they often reformulate, the dilemmas a society faces at a particular historical moment. Creative processes emerge from specific people, set in their social, cultural, and historical circumstances. When distinct visions and traditions come together, expressive cultural forms often become politically charged because different actors have unequal chances to make their voices heard. The depiction of situations where cultures mix and blend thus makes both an analytical and a political statement. Similarly, the authors in this volume bring political passions to their studies and move between distance and closeness, detachment and involvement, rather than remaining fixed within the constricted space of detached impartiality. The cultural texts under study here thus often appear as dialogues or conversations rather than monologues.

The ethnographer herself or himself frequently appears as one character among others in the dialogues and conversations of this book. She or he appears not as somebody who has gone native, but as another person (no longer a mere outsider, but not really an insider either) witnessing fellow human beings with sympathy, exasperation, tenderness, distress, and amusement. The sigh, the groan, the caress, the snarl, and the chuckle, all marked by human limitations and insight, inform the ethnographer's perceptions of social life and creativity. The acceptance of one's own role in producing ethnographic writing collapses the infamous dichotomy between Self and Other. The object of analysis also becomes an analyzing subject, and vice versa. What phenomenologist Alfred Schutz (1967: 163–67) called a "We Relation" emerges as ethnographers interact with their subjects. We share time and space, and we grow old together.

In its central subjects and in its style of writing culture, this book celebrates play. The authors find that playfulness erupts in solemn everyday worlds as well as in the circumscribed activities, set apart from work, that Turner or cultural historian Johan Huizinga (1955)

would expect. Stepping out of seriousness proves creative, subversive, and innovative. Linguist and literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin argues that laughter, intertwined with the grotesque and the carnivalesque, breaks the grip of taken for granted realities. "It," he says, "frees human consciousness, thought and imagination for new potentialities. For this reason great changes, even in the field of science, are always preceded by a certain carnival consciousness that prepares the way" (1968: 49). Carnival and laughter thus dissolve the world of earnest necessity into imaginative blueprints and perhaps later realizations of human potentialities. Far from being frivolous, humor in these essays is fundamental to experimentation and politics, for ethnographers and their subjects alike.

This book builds upon recent works of critical anthropology that have called attention to conceptual and political issues involved in writing ethnography. Several significant experimental works that have already appeared have been cited and discussed by Marcus and Cushman (1982) and Marcus and Fischer (1986). In addition, two recent collections, Bruner 1984; and Turner and Bruner 1986, have been landmarks in their graceful bridging of theory and practice in writing engaged social description (see also Clifford and Marcus 1986; Clifford 1989; Rosaldo 1989). The authors here try, through actual ethnographic analyses, to show how circumstantial social descriptions can illuminate and revise theories of cultural creativity.

Like many people in and beyond anthropology, the contributors to this book sorely miss Victor Turner. Turner had a deep grasp of enduring complex processes, such as bereavement, with their maddening blend of sadness, rage, wrenching hurt, and the ludic. The anthropologist's search for meaning, the creative spirit as encountered in its most concrete cultural particularity, animated his work. He thought and lived his ideas about social processes to the fullest, with insight, wit, and a sense of the carnivalesque. We stand diminished without him.

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