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Writing on Art

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For more than three decades, changing trends in the discourses of anthropology and cultural studies have exhorted us to remember that we are all implicated in the worlds that we study.

Janet Catherine Berlo

In the Introduction to her latest book *Not Native American Art*, Janet Berlo describes how writing about her subject—replication, duplication, and “vexed identities”— necessarily involves “the insertion of the author,” as she puts it. It’s not hard to find anecdotes, recollections, and moments of reflection throughout the book, places where Janet trains the lens away from things and ideas and onto herself and her own changing thinking on the topics at hand. Such a gesture, she admits, might appear “self-indulgent” to some, but I find the reasons less about ego and more about the ethics of writing.

Janet’s writing has always sought out worlds defined by contact—the trans and intercultural, the dialogic and the hybrid. It seems only fitting that her writing would embody that hybridity and embrace many traditions, the lyricism of prose, the rigor of academia, and a key tenet of the essay—referencing oneself. It is often the case in essay writing that doing so can impart at least two things: an argument and the process of figuring out that argument. Or, as essayist Joan Didion famously put it: “I write entirely to find out what I’m thinking, what I’m looking at, what I see and what it means.”

As a reader, I find the head-scratching, the doubt, and the inclusion of competing points of view are all part of arriving at new ground. An essayist often ferries readers through that

arrival. One might simply say this is the difference between means and ends, of process versus product. But for me, a generous writer both shows and tells.

It might come as no surprise then that for years Janet taught a course simply titled Writing on Art. The purpose, according to its syllabus, was to build “skills in researching and writing about many kinds of art,” to “analyze prose by artists, historians, cultural critics, poets,” and lastly, “WRITE, WRITE, WRITE.” Some topics included avoiding “wordiness,” the “trauma of citation,” “understanding art through artist’s biographies,” and “writing for general audiences.”

To us her students, she bestowed a love of description at the same time that she urged pithiness. She passed on her fascination with things, their materiality and “social lives.” She taught us to look thoroughly at the historical record, revise arguments accordingly, and consider structures of power. She taught us, finally, that to become writers, we must indeed, “write, write, write.”

The subject line of an email once said: “Janet has nothing to read.” She wanted to keep me on track, yes, but I believe she also knew that improvement only came with practice and an exacting editor. As a working writer today, I still think about the advice she gave. One nugget goes something like, “it’s better for an article to be 80 percent done and in the world.” As writers we are never truly satisfied. Still, what we might find unfinished, others will see as a building block for yet more writing. This is the promise that our work holds, the invitation to ourselves and the future to simply keep going.

Janet taught these and other skills to her students. Janet also practiced and continues to practice them herself. This book is proof of her virtuosity and unique ability to write for everyone, whether now or years from now. Her sentences are crisp and declarative. Passages ring with clarity. And in the moments when she is figurative, her writing becomes so tangible I can almost see a picture. Case in point, the first line of her first chapter: “Strands of mystery, nostalgia, connoisseurship, obfuscation, and sleight of hand wrap around historical objects assumed to be Native-made.”

What’s revelatory, moreover, is her humor. At the beginning of Chapter Two, “Cultural Cross-Dressers,” she recounts an anecdote from the late 1980s when she first encountered Reginald and Gladys Laubin, elderly white people invited to perform in Plains-style regalia at a powwow at the Denver Museum of Natural History. “There was still a lot I did not know,” she

recalls, “but I did know one thing with a visceral intensity: these ancient, wrinkled white people dressed as Indians were freakish, fossils of an earlier time. Embarrassing, really.”

Though the sentiment is both funny and lacerating, Janet quickly goes on to reconsider. “Now what embarrasses me is my own quick dismissal, which was rooted in ignorance,” she writes wryly. “But it is also a good example of how the barometer of cultural acceptability shifted relatively quickly during the final decades of the twentieth century.”

I laughed (obviously) and reflected on what my own reaction might be. Living in Santa Fe, where I’ve observed all manner of performance and “playing Indian,” it wasn’t hard to conjure my own similarly visceral reactions. But as the discussion unfolded and Janet reassessed, I had to pause. *Why had her position changed*, I wondered? The chapter, as I would continue to read, pushed me to the very frontiers of my comfort zone. That’s because I had to wrestle with my own hardened personal opinions on the subject as I engaged with the vast swath of historical realities in which cultural-cross dressing was sanctioned. The thought of the Laubins still unsettles me. The chapter, however, asked me to consider the spaces in which sartorial innovation has served diplomacy for Natives and non-Natives alike, as one example. That consideration, I also realized, by no means negates the contexts in which appropriation can be in poor taste, at best, and very harmful, at worst. What I finally concluded was that the burden of colonization is itself a prism, one that makes it difficult, if not near impossible, to see the exceptions. But it is this weighing of multiple paradigms that one must confront in a book about vexed identities and invented traditions.

I think, for example, of Janet’s brilliant discussion on replication and reproduction in Chapter Three. The driving question is whether there is an appropriate context in which white people can make replicas of Native visual and material culture. Or is it the case that such acts always represent appropriation and profiteering? Of course, there are many strands to this debate—all oversimplified here—but the question essentially comes down to ethics, the marketplace, and the amorphous landscape of nostalgia in the white American psyche.

Janet begins with an example, *Han Skaska—the Shirtwearers*, by Cathy Smith, “full-size replicas of the garments and regalia of twelve distinguished leaders of the nineteenth century...” as she writes. The crux is this: Smith, a white woman and self-described adopted daughter of two respected elders from the Cheyenne River Sioux, created these replicas for

wealthy collectors; others have been created for movie sets. Identity is complex and how cultures perform their own measures of gatekeeping are perhaps more so. But at least for the Native and non-Native people Janet interviewed, the responses cross a surprising spectrum. The first: Rich white men should not own actual nineteenth-century war shirts, so it is appropriate to commission replicas from Smith. The second: So long as the object is correct, the ethnicity of the maker is not important. The third: the maker of Native replicas should be Native, period.

The debate then shifts from the maker to the collector as Janet describes an amusing conversation between herself and Joe D. Horse Capture regarding Smith's Shirtwearers project: "White people! I'll never understand them," he tells her. "Why would someone want these figures in his home?"

Here, the chapter reaches its crescendo. Readers have thus far been given multiple and opposing points of view from which to draw their own conclusions, a thorny path that Janet aptly charts. Admittedly, my own position changed more than once as I worked my way through the chapter. The point for me was that such an ethical minefield not only demands a rigorous examination of the known examples in all their subtleties but also rigorous self-examination, for her and readers. Where she arrives is key: the broader collective consciousness that animates any desire to own such replicas in the first place. Janet writes: "I believe that in the American psyche, shields, feathered headdresses and war shirts from the Plains form a constellation of *lieux de mémoire* denoting a troubling relationship to American history—and an attempt to achieve distance and absolution from the real historical record." Most Americans have not reckoned with this horrific past, she goes on, instead choosing to celebrate the more palatable projections of Indianness they've created for themselves. The result is an inchoate acknowledgement "that we treated Indians badly."

I find this chapter so compelling because it reveals Janet's thoughtful conversations with other experts about these issues in real time, conversations that no doubt honed her own thinking on the subject. It is that glimpse into the process of figuring something out that also shows, obliquely, where makers and interlocutors come together to create meaning.

Janet has written about this process often—"the dialogic method of cultural interpretation," as she calls it in her work on the Diné weaver, Alberta Thomas. While

anthropologists like Dennis Tedlock have borrowed the framework from Mikhail Bakhtin and his close study of the novel, Janet has certainly integrated it into her own interpretations of cultural production and, in this context, her framing of Thomas's relationships to traders and anthropologists. "Among the more useful Bakhtinian insights for Tedlock," she writes, "was the notion that language unfolds dialogically, constructing meaning not through individual utterances but through the context of communicative acts between and among people. Tedlock applied this not only to culture-making but to the cross-cultural making of meaning."

This framing is also useful in considering Janet's relationship to history, people, and the subjects that she chooses to pursue, for she is among those embarking on the "cross-cultural making of meaning." It's worth noting that Janet has built her own enduring relationships, making the "insertion of the author" in her book an open acknowledgement of that fact and of her role as an interlocutor. Sometimes, as Toni Morrison once wrote, "the subject of the dream is the dreamer." Or as Janet puts it, "we are all implicated in the worlds we study." Indeed, as Janet tells us from the outset, this book "chronicles a personal journey." This admission, if it can be called one, is instructive, since Janet has borne witness to a field amidst tremendous change just as much as ushered that change into the field herself. Perhaps this last point is not the one she wants to make. But by giving us entrée into that journey, she walks us through the contradictions and exceptions that have riddled her for years.

When I think about the best examples of first-person writing, it's clear that the impulse is never self-indulgent, but rather a way of turning the mirror back onto the self. In those instances, the gesture is but a brief acknowledgement of subjectivity and of the events and conditions that shape a worldview. It is an acknowledgement of desire, bias, and fear as one fumbles around for meaning and telescopes that meaning to others. It is an acknowledgement, ultimately, of blind spots and the fact that ideas can transform over time.

To her students, Janet has always been a generous reader. To her readers, she continues to be a generous writer.