Education, Cultural Production, and Figuring Out What to Do Next

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Language does not unite people. On the contrary it is the arbitrariness of language that makes them try to communicate by forcing them to translate – but also puts them in a community of intelligence.

(Rancière, 1999 [1991]: 58)

It is our fate, as human beings living ordinary lives with friends and foes, relatives and co-workers, that what we know about each other at the beginning of the day is not quite helpful in figuring out what to do with them – *next*. Our consociates, "the special jury that examines and confirms the course of one's being and becoming" (Plath, 1980: 8), are always likely to surprise us.

Consider Vignette 1, where the representative from a large company was told by an assistant-principal to commit what would amount to fraud in order to resolve a scheduling problem. What is one going to do when one is told: "You can bill for two hours" (for one hour of work)? At *this* moment, sorting out personal or institutional plausible causes for such a suggestion might be interesting but altogether fruitless. At *this* moment, the issue for the participants concerns the production of futures (one in which one commits a fraud, or one in which one withdraws, among many other possibilities). The issue, for anthropologists, is to follow the participants in their efforts to produce a future with what is given to them.

Anthropology is said to have started with Franz Boas' rejection of the evolutionary determinism that comforted the political powers of the time as they rationalized colonial policies, and that also led to an induced blindness for the vast range of human possibilities. He demonstrated that one could not predict how the people he met in the west coast of North America organized the details of their everyday lives, or what would be their major concerns. Even if the people appeared to live as we imagine the first human beings did, tens of thousand years ago, Kwakiutl, Haida, Tlingit, Tsimshian, etc., were also unique and particular. Each people had found one way to live in their ecology with their technology, while their immediate neighbors, with very similar ecologies and technologies, had found other ways. Boas' students generalized the argument and also emphasized, particularly in the work of Ruth Benedict (1934), what sort of practical problems each particular way of organizing life, what she called a pattern of culture, produced for the people who had to live by it. The first anthropologists of education, particularly Jules Henry (1963), were driven by the same sense that "culture" always made particular problems for particular people. My own work has built on this sense of the fatefulness of culture. From my earliest work on lives in the American Midwest (Varenne, 1977), to my work (with Ray McDermott, 1998) on culture "*as*" disability, to my current work on education as a general principle, I have continued to investigate the consequences of what I now call the "culturation" of human experience.

All people, I argue, have to figure out, day in and day out, the exact conditions they and their consociates face together. They have to figure out what to do with what they find and, almost always, how to convince consociates that *this* rather than *that* course of action might be more satisfactory for any number of goals. In this process of discovery, explanation, and reconstitution, they are likely to find even more matters that they were not aware they needed to investigate. Most significantly, the search that leads to a *next* act also produces new conditions. These, like the original ones, will be unique, grounded in a particular time and space, and altogether factual in their consequences. In other words, as people, together, act *next*, and thereby "culture" (transform, reconstitute, *bricole*) the *previous*, they produce a temporary state for their consociates, "a" culture. In much of my earlier writing, most recently with Ray McDermott (McDermott and Varenne, 2006; Varenne and McDermott, 1998), I have been concerned with "culture" in this sense we inherit from Boasian anthropology and Saussurian linguistics. For example, when McDermott and I write about "the American School," we write about a historically constituted

state, the "house we inhabit" – one of our favorite metaphors. I am now turning to the activities that produce such states (Varenne, 2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2010), whether they last a few minutes or centuries, whether they involve a few people or hundreds of millions. And so I play with "culture" as both noun and verb, as historical product and ongoing productive activity.

I place "figuring out" (as well as interpreting, explaining, convincing, etc.) at the core of this activity. It is an activity I deem "educational" in a pragmatic tradition more than compatible with cultural anthropology in most of its versions – as long as the phrase "culture is learned" (in the past of individuals) is rewritten as "culture is learn*ing* (and teach*ing*)" in the fully progressive sense of an ongoing collective process activated, throughout life, when faced with renewed uncertainty. This activity does produce a specific *here* and *now*. Like the walls Robert Frost wrote about, and which may or may not make good neighbors, what is produced by human construction is fully factual in its consequences. But a wall does not determine what can be done with it. Hunters may tear them down, hikers may ignore them. Cultural facts constrain, but do not determine. As people approach the architectural, institutional, political walls that frame their lives, the question becomes what to do with them.

This, for example, attempting to schedule multiple activities in the same room, is the problem that *now* requires figuring out a plausible *next*. *This* that someone else has made catches us in its tangled web of connections, potentialities, threats of consequences, etc. Above all, and against the most common interpretations of Geertz's famous phrase (1973: 5), *this* "web of significance" is not one "we" spin. The webs that make the most difference are spun by people "we" do not know, in other times, spaces, cohorts. We, our consociates and I, are caught at a specific historical moment, or "culture," with specific conditions and consequences we cannot escape. But *this* culture is not "ours" even as we work with it, day in and day out. *This* culture is our problem, necessarily triggering what Rancière called, in a particularly felicitous phrase, "a community of intelligence" (1999 [1991]: 58).

In this chapter, I sketch how to explore the key terms "education," "culture," and "figuring it out." I start with a brief summary of the theoretical grounds of an argument I developed at greater length elsewhere (2008 [2007]). I then summarize a few exemplary ethnographies and move to develop further what I mean when I write about education as a fundamental aspect of cultural production in general. I conclude with suggestions about a new way of writing about the production of America, and the specific forms of ignorance with which people in the United States must struggle.

FIGURING OUT HOW TO STUDY "FIGURING OUT"

Half a century of research and theoretical developments has demonstrated the analytic power of starting with the postulate that human sociability is founded on ever renewed ignorance, active searching, and determined persuasion. An extensive body of research has demonstrated that performing even the simplest tasks requires ongoing work done in concert with others also involved in figuring out what to do *next*, *here*, and *now*. Who is to speak first in a telephone conversation (Schegloff, 1968)? Who is to read next in a classroom reading lesson (McDermott and Aron, 1978;

McDermott and Tylbor, 1983)? More complex tasks, involving many more people, are even more likely to present new puzzles as what had been settled as "known" is revealed to require new learning. Several such moments have been well documented in recent ethnography: Given a science laboratory, what sort of experiments should be performed next (Latour and Woolgar, 1979)? Given a prenatal counseling center, what sort of advice should be given following an amniocentesis test (Rapp, 1999)? Given the collapse of an industry, what are workers to do (Ferguson, 1999)?

These are instances of a general question about the construction of a future given some present conditions. This question concerned the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1973 [1969]) and the linguist Émile Benveniste (1971 [1966], 1974) when they wrote about the speaking out of experience (what they called "enunciation"). It concerned Lévi-Strauss when he wrote about *bricolage* and myth-making (1966 [1962]; 1969 [1964]). Congruent arguments have been made by de Certeau (1984 [1980]) and Boon (1999) as they emphasize people's ongoing production of what Boon, building on Thoreau, qualified as "extra-vagant" alternatives to what some observers might have expected (on the basis of prior knowledge), or to what some efficiency experts might have proposed (given hypotheses about functionality). Roman Jakobson (1960, 1985 [1956]), when writing about metalinguistics, also contributed to the overall framework by exploring the means and conditions of cultural production. All worked at the intersection between conditions, uncertainty, and imagination. They challenged the common assumption that social order requires earlier socialization or enculturation. Rancière (1999 [1991]) has pushed this furthest philosophically by making ongoing, uncontrollable education the motor of human life, with socialization an altogether unpleasant side-effect.

The work mentioned above is often heavily theoretical. It also provides the foundation for much recent ethnography, as well as for a re-reading of earlier ethnographies. It should lead to a recasting of our own practice as anthropologists of education. I have argued elsewhere (Varenne, 2008) that, in the ongoing practice of the field, we over-emphasize the travails of American schooling. More limiting is our emphasis on "what has [not] been learned," unconsciously or automatically. We inherit this emphasis from many sources: the American tradition in cultural anthropology ("culture is that which is learned"); the French and/or Marxist critical traditions ("the problem is what the powerful make us *méconnaitre* ['mis-know']"); and all research looking for the reasons "why" some people do not learn. We need to escape *méconnaissance* and recapture what was most powerful in early anthropology. Then, those who built the field demonstrated that human beings, everywhere, are involved in finding ways, actually many different ways, to survive in all sorts of ecological niches, including all the niches produced by other human beings earlier in the history of humanity. We now need to expand this demonstration by showing that ecological transformation, material production, biological reproduction, etc., are not matters that happen mysteriously in some subterranean terrain. They happen in ongoing deliberations during which people bring out the locally and temporarily salient aspects of their conditions as they discuss what they seek to transform, thereby producing new conditions, a new culture, for their consociates.

Vignette 2 can serve as an illustration of the complex historical sequences that collective deliberations require. Once upon a time, central administrators placed a

school on a list of "Schools in Need of Improvement" ("SINIs"), that is of failing schools. This school's principal convinced administrators that this was an error. But the school was still on the list and had to report that it had done what SINIs must do. This was the condition (culture in its multiple arbitrariness) that the principal and the teachers now faced as they deliberated what to do *next*. The vignette is taken from the meeting when the teachers, in turn, produced for their students conditions that made all of them "failures for the current purpose." And so they all "passed" (in the ethnomethodological sense), successfully, as failures. They had figured out some of the paradoxical complexities in the administration of school failure; they had convinced each other that, at *this* moment and for *this* purpose, they would do *this* rather than *that*; and then they moved out to face renewed uncertainties when they faced students and parents. Or, as I would now put it, they kept educating themselves about their world, including what they could change and what they could not.

Vignette 2

Teacher 1: We are a successful SINI that is failing?

Teacher 2: Or are we a failing SINI because we are succeeding, excelling? [laughing throughout room]

Teacher 1: Face it. We're succeeding and the DOE thinks we're failures.

Principal: Actually, they [the DOE] know we met our AYP last year and this year.

Teacher 3: So, why are we SINI again?...

Principal: I'm frustrated too! We are a remarkable success here. All of you know that. I certainly know that. They [the DOE] say we need improvement because we failed to meet the ELA AYP, but we didn't ... I don't want us to get hung up on labels. We know that we met the AYP and still we need to direct some energy into all the things that get thrown at us for being a SINI. We know how to do this, even if we don't want to, right?

Nonetheless, for the next half hour, the teachers worked to make sense of the SINI designation. They planned what to do next as if their successful students were actually failing. They decided to have students do more concentrated vocabulary and arithmetic in small groups, to tutor individuals for a larger part of each day, and to make weekly benchmarks for their classes to meet (Koyama, 2010: Chapter 8).

EXEMPLARY ETHNOGRAPHIES

Quite a few anthropologists have been tracing such educative activity all around the world. Three recent ethnographies can serve to illustrate the range of what can be done.

Grey Gundaker (1998, 2008 [2007]), for example, makes us pay attention to the activity of some West Africans when they arrived in the United States. They soon figured out that those who had enslaved them paid a lot of attention to particular forms of engravings through which they appeared to exercise their power. They found out that they were forbidden to learn how to read – and yet quite a few taught themselves to do so in the face of the determined opposition of their masters. Gundaker shows

how complex the situation could be: even slave-owners figured out that having literate slaves could be helpful. Slaves, and also sometimes enlightened owners, had to answer many questions on an ongoing basis: how is reading to be taught?; who can/may/must read when?; what can be done to mitigate potentially disastrous consequences when illegitimate reading is discovered? Gundaker's is classic ethnography at its best. Like Boas or Malinowski, she brings out what some people are not generally known as having done, and thereby expands our understanding of our humanity.

In a similar vein, Fida Adely (2008 [2007]) tells us about high school girls in Jordan. They were facing varieties of Islamic practices that might or might not be permissible, might or might not be escaped. Some of the girls insisted that they should veil and that all forms of music were forbidden. Some of the same girls were recruited to sing, unveiled, in front of men, by the administration of their school. Neither girls nor administrators controlled the conditions that made it necessary for them to deliberate about Islam. Instead, they demonstrated that they could use sophisticated metalinguistic devices to discuss the ways in which Islam impacted them.

Michelle Verma's work (2008, 2010) with Indo-Caribbeans in Queens, New York, makes a similar point. As two-time migrants, first from India, and then from British Guyana, the Hindus among them had to figure out, again, how to conduct their Hinduism, practically and on an ongoing basis. They found themselves settling in neighborhoods, predominantly Irish or Italian until then, that had been laid out by American urban designers, but not for Hindus. The migrants may have learned their Hinduism earlier in their lives, but this knowledge was not enough. New questions had to be answered in short order: where are our temples to be located?; what are the issues about locating a temple *here*?; can we conduct the same kinds of rituals we could conduct *then*, in Guyana, *now* that we are in the United States?; where are we going to find our priests?; how do we figure out whether someone who claims to be a priest is indeed a priest?

It would not be too difficult to recast many classical ethnographies as records of educational efforts. As an example, I take a classic pair by Evans-Pritchard (1940, 1951). The books are usually presented, like much anthropology of the time, as pictures of the "way the Nuer are," useful for those who might wish to control the Nuer, or devise policies better attuned to their "local knowledge." However, taken together, Evans-Pritchard's accounts can also be read as documenting how the Nuer puzzled over each other and their physical environment and how, eventually, they built something that produced new issues to resolve for themselves and their descendants. Reading Evans-Pritchard as someone solely concerned with social structure is to miss that he, like most anthropologists, found out about the Nuer by witnessing and recording the struggles of the people he talked to and their uncertainties about what to do next. Evans-Pritchard does write at times, like most of us, in a declarative way that appears to reify the Nuer. But as soon as he gives a more fine-grained sense of his experiences, we get to feel the deliberate work of the Nuer with their neighbors, and each other. He cites the poignant lament of a father:

> You think how when they were little you carried them in your arms and played with them and fed them with tidbits, and now they have gone to live with a man who did not bring them up, because it was with his cattle that their mother was married. (Evans-Pritchard, 1951: 149)

As Tolstoy said, all unhappy families are unhappy in their own way. This lament gives a sense of what can lead to unhappiness in Nuer land (complex rules about marriage, cattle, and reproductive rights). And it reminds anthropologists of what has always been good ethnographic practice: First, direct your ethnographic gaze on the issues of everyday life in their full emotional valence; then, follow unflinchingly the leads one discovers towards the historical conditions that people cannot escape, even as they seek to transform them; and, finally, write about all this without shortchanging either the factuality of conditions, or the efforts of the people to figure them out.

Vignette 3

"Lots of parents here work two or three jobs. Both parents, usually. So, having their kids in a safe educational environment allowed them more flexible and longer work schedules. By putting their kids in SES, they were able to pick them up at 5:30 instead of 3:30 and that's got to be a big difference in work hours. Most of our parents are Mexican immigrants who want their children to succeed. So, you know they do what they think will help their kids. Like work more hours to provide for them and put them in tutoring … Parents aren't going to stop this just because the school got off some list it was never on. Hey, if I had to work, I too would put Alyssa in SES ['Supplementary Educational Services' consisting of free afterschool tutoring]." (Koyama, 2010: ch. 8)

Vignette 3 concludes this section with a glimpse of the work some new immigrants must perform as they figure out what New York City and its schools are like. They are men and women who came from Mexico, had children, and discovered one of the many paradoxical properties of the culture that had now caught them: having children attend a "failing school" can be useful. And so they fought the teachers' attempt to reclassify their school as a success.

ON THE PRODUCTION OF CULTURE

My claim is a broad one and does not solely concern the anthropology "of education" as a peripheral subfield, or as another attempt to "apply" anthropology "to the problems of our days." Rather, I claim that education must be placed at the core of anthropology as the flip side of the concept of culture. Levinson (1999) has made a similar argument, which I expand. As anthropologists, we have claimed with very good reasons that "culture" (the historical specificity of human conditions) is, or should be, an inescapable concern of *all* behavioral sciences (including sociobiology) because there are so many ways of being human. We must now demonstrate that "education" should be a similarly inescapable concern, and for reasons that are a direct correlate of those that make culture inescapable. The activities that produce variability, as well as the activities that seek to control it and thus reveal the problematic character of this production, must be our concern and must not be reduced to automatic processes of human evolution. When Marx (1970 [1845]) wrote that "men" "distinguish themselves from animals" [that is, I would say, "distinguish themselves from their sociobiological endowments"] "as soon as they begin to produce their means of subsistence," then he implied a theory of education.

To say this, I am well aware, will be controversial. I call for the challenging of many grand theories of the twentieth century when they discussed what might be the motors of the human production of humanity. Rather than hypothesizing past causes, I start with the moments when, in the life of some collectivity, something is noticed and some in this collectivity produce something that had never been quite done before – and which will constitute new problems for future others. Prototypical might be that moment Jean-Jacques Rousseau once imagined when one man told another one "this is my land" and the other man agreed to act as if this statement made sense. This may never have happened in this way, but human history is made of such moments when speech (and all other symbolic media) does "act" and imposes its consequences – including the need to educate oneself into one's new conditions.

These are the moments that concern me. The human production of human conditions (in the past) cannot but induce new forms of specific ignorance (about the present) that lead to renewed production (for the future). Whatever one's understanding of "history," the local production of new means of material production cannot be taken as automatic or mechanical. For example, as Anthony Wallace documented powerfully in a wonderful historical ethnography (1978), it was an ongoing challenge to constitute oneself as a capitalist in the early 1800s (particular time) in Rockdale (particular place) with particular others (engineers in England, new immigrants, craftsmen, etc.). Everyone found out that something always happened that made them ignorant – and this included not only the workers or local craftsmen, but also the local engineers, factory owners, their banks, etc. As one owner put it, "Not only was the machinery badly made, it was also 'badly planned.' But he and his mechanics worked with it and he added newer and better machines as well" (Wallace, 1978: 187).

More recently, Bourdieu and Rancière have urged us to pay attention to the induced ignorance that is the necessary correlate of human cultural evolution. But they move in very different directions. Bourdieu and Passeron put the practical issue quite well: ignorance is produced by the past development of "arbitrary forms by arbitrary powers" (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977 [1970]: 5). They develop this to claim that "every [institutionalized education system] must produce and reproduce, by the means proper to the institution, the institutional conditions for misrecognition of the symbolic violence which it exerts" (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977 [1970]: 61). Whether this "must" be the case is the core issue I raise. It is just as likely that "arbitrary forms" imposed by "arbitrary powers" trigger the constitution of "communities of intelligence" (Rancière, 1999 [1991]: 58), that are, of course, also "polities (communities) of practice." Before Rancière, Merleau-Ponty had also faced the phenomenological implications of the fact that all human expression must proceed through arbitrary codes. Merleau-Ponty argued this meant that all expressive acts must be an ongoing struggle. "Meaning," he wrote in a striking phrase, is "between what has been said and what has never been said" (1973 [1969]: 38). Thus, he prefigured the intellectual resistance against the common sense that enculturation into a particular arbitrary makes it *impossible* to say what has not been said before, or do what institutions, even when overwhelmingly powerful, say cannot be done. Without denying the difficulty of producing that which has not been produced before, it is evident that what has never been quite said or done in *this* particular way, does get said and done in just *this* way.

I build on Rancière and Merleau-Ponty and focus on education as the ensemble of the concrete, local activities that people conduct in real time when they are in "communities of intelligence" as a polity figuring out their exact present conditions, and what to do next. I cannot expand here on the properties of these activities as they are being revealed by current research. I know we will need to pay close attention to what ethnomethodologists and conversational analysts have written about sequentiality, accountability, indexicality, and also, as Garfinkel has recently brought out, about the ongoing instructions people give each other to keep everybody on track. We will need to pay attention to the operation of networks and machines, in the way Latour has urged us to do. We will need to pay attention to matters of metalinguistics and metapragmatics, as well as of poetry, play, and extra-vagance.

This leaves one major problem. The temporal sequence I modeled as "then-now-next" is not bound to any particular length or to any maximum number of people involved – though the minimum is probably three, as Arensberg argues (1982). The theoretical point has generally been illustrated, from Pearce, through G.H. Mead, to Garfinkel, through cases involving small numbers of people, in face to face interaction, and for short periods of time (often a matter of minutes). Thus, Garfinkel tells us that driving down a freeway requires the ongoing work of a particular cohort instructing each other. It is what he calls a "tutorial problem" (2002: 92, 162–165). Many researchers in schooling and family life have demonstrated repeatedly the reflexive and indexical properties of sequences such as reading lessons or familial events. The important thing was to show that, in all cases, it is *these* drivers, children, spouses, from which one is getting instructions about what to do *next* to accomplish *this* task. It is *these* people who then have to be instructed about what one is attempting to accomplish.

Bourdieu repeatedly criticized this theoretical tradition for its purported inability to deal with processes (1998 [1994]) that proceed on a larger stage and over longer periods of time. It is more accurate to argue that the full demonstration remains to be done. Highway driving, reading lessons, putting children to bed also index the work of engineers, state regulators, lawmakers. Their work produces culture by deeply inscribing instructions about what to do or not do to accomplish a task that no one ever had to accomplish *heretofore*. This work always brings together larger cohorts than the immediately visible people. These large cohorts include people far removed from the immediately interacting cohort, their relationships are often mediated by inhuman actors (roads, buildings, machines), and they most often deal with each other asynchronously over long periods of time. Bruno Latour is now famous for having developed the argument (2005). Daniel Miller and his students (1998; Horst and Miller, 2006) have been moving in the same direction.

ON THE PRODUCTION OF AMERICA

Putting together older work with emerging work provides every indication that the postulate that should now guide our work is one where we privilege the tracing of linkages, consequences, and ongoing activity over the summarizing of personal properties.

In conclusion, I sketch where this postulate might lead when working among people caught in the American polity.

With Ray McDermott, I have struggled against the lazy assumption that America must be the product of "Americans." I have attempted repeatedly to state more carefully how a historical pattern ("America") is experienced and possibly reconstituted in the everyday lives of the people of the United States (Varenne, 1986). In my work with McDermott, we have kept searching for the mechanisms linking a child saying "I could read page 4" (when all know she cannot) to the School America has built. How can a statement like "all men are created equal" lead to a teacher asking "who can read page 4?" and then to the production of official records stating "this child cannot read page 4," "this teacher does not know how to teach," "this school is failing"? This is surely not because most (many? some?) have been enculturated to believe mindlessly that identifying children, teachers, or schools as failures is a good thing. *Some* people do make very good arguments that such identifications are a good thing. *These* people have convinced the powers that be to act on these arguments so that, now perhaps more than ever, all their consociates ("Americans") must deal with these identifications. Thus, at every level, from the most local of classroom reading groups, to the most general of political settings, where Congress legislates schooling (not to mention anthropologists of education), it makes sense for people to act as if these identifications were real. For them, at this moment, these identifications *are* real.

Again, it is essential to notice that, now (in 2010) like at every other time, whether in a New York classroom or in Washington, people do not agree about what to do next, even though they find themselves having to *do* some thing – perhaps even against their best judgment. In the process, the powerful do not simply set a generalized context. Rather, they produce a set of specific instructions about who should do what next and thereby set in motion the constitution of new networks of stakeholders who must then instruct each other about what each must do next – including perhaps how to make it look as if one has done what one has been instructed to do, even if one has not done it.

Vignette 4

One Hundred Seventh Congress of the United States of America
AT THE FIRST SESSION

SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE
Begun and held at the City of Washington on Wednesday, the third day of January, two thousand and one

An Act
To close the achievement gap with accountability, flexibility, and choice, so that no child is left behind.

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,
This title may be cited as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

Vignette 4 appears as a starting point. The vignette is a quote from the first few lines of a US Federal Government website for what is also known as "Public Law 107–110." Starting in 2001, this (speech) Act has produced much. It has made practical differences in the lives of millions of administrators, teachers, students, their families, as well as large and small corporations, not to mention all the scholars who have been at work measuring, investigating, and criticizing this Act.

Where do we, as ethnographers of America, go next, given such an Act that is also "data" in our anthropological world? We should not go, I argue, where we may be most tempted to go, and that is on to a search for the motivations, beliefs, or values of the people who en-Acted PL 107–110 (aka "NCLB"). It is tempting to follow critics who see this Act as the product of the (mostly) white (mostly) males who made it happen. These may be symbolized by President Bush and Senator Kennedy who, according to any "great men" theory of history, are responsible for making the Act happen. As social scientists we might push further and search for the men (and some women) for whom Bush and Kennedy are just the most notable stand in. We could point out that many of these people did not know much about what they were doing (they were just plain stupid), or that they were misguided (they were too well schooled in academic policy research), or that they were mostly concerned with expanding their personal power (they were just plain evil). As cultural anthropologists, we could take this further and note how the Act was wrapped in redundant calls to American pieties, from the sanctity of childhood to the metaphor of life as a race. All this may be "the reason why" the Act was not only popular (it passed with 87 votes in the Senate), but altogether common sense, a matter of "America" as the culture into which "Americans" seem so thoroughly socialized that they cannot see how it hurts them. Such an analysis (or similar ones) could then claim to have "explained" the Act in terms of its antecedents.

Excavating the personal or institutional antecedents of an act can be interesting, but will not tell anyone much about what the act is doing, in the here and now. This is why I argue for an alternative well illustrated by Koyama (2010) as she elaborates on Latour. In her work, she follows the linkages that make NCLB a particular type of constraint on the various stakeholders which it constitutes. In the process, she demonstrates that NCLB makes different kinds of problems, and thus requires different, though specifiable, educational deliberations, depending on the exact cohort that must act in its terms. The four vignettes included in this chapter illustrate what is being brought out, and indicate where our next ethnographies should focus.

In this perspective, we make sense of the meaning of an Act (what difference it makes) by sorting out the other acts that it indexes, to which it responds, and which it anticipates. The Act then appears as a moment in the ongoing conversation people mostly located in the northern half of the Americas have been having for two and a half centuries about democracy, merit, schools, testing, and the unintended consequences of earlier acts. This is now a worldwide conversation – though certain voices are louder than others. These are conversations that have led to all sorts of Acts continually reforming earlier Acts, in the United States of course, but also all over the world. Conversations in Washington echo other conversations, and will be echoed in many other chambers where different aspects of the Act will become salient, includ-

ing, of course, many that were not intended. Work in comparative schooling under colonization and later is fascinating in this regard. Anthropologists, like Koyama, may be best at tracing the more local of the conversations. But they should not fail to point out the broader linkages, or yield the field to quantitative research when the question is a general one. Rather, they must demonstrate the power of other kinds of generalizations as they trace the networks or webs of significance.

To me, NCLB is just one statement in a cacophony of other statements now leading to conversations about the *next* Act. In fact, by 2010, NCLB is starting to fade into history, in one of its forms at least. While much is still in the air, the Obama administration now refers to the act under a different name going back to 1965 (the "Federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act"), thereby indexing Lyndon Johnson rather than George Bush. What exactly might change when PL 107–110 comes up for re-authorization is an open question.

That the *next* will always be an open question requiring further work is the core of my argument. McDermott and I have quipped that "culture is less about the past than the future" (2006), and my call now is an extension of our work to recast the anthropological task away from (causal) explanation or any pretense of prediction. Instead, we must recapture what has always been the strength of the discipline, and that is the demonstration that human beings *can* do what some other human beings, particularly when they have political authority over other human beings, will not see them doing. The task is a dual one. On the one hand, it should produce well-specified accounts of constraints for a particular set of consociates, at a particular time in their history together. On the other hand, it should reveal the work these consociates do with each other, in the present, to make it a better day in the future.

Everyone produces culture out of their ignorance and with the stuff they find around them. To the extent that the anthropology of education is also one of the places where anthropology does directly enter the public sphere, then we must take care that our contributions are grounded in our own insights and not in the most hackneyed of policy debates. However hegemonic these discourses can be, particularly for university-based scholars, they can be resisted, and another *next* can be produced, if we can figure out where we are and where we could go.

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CHAPTER 5

Recovering History in the Anthropology of Education

Elsie Rockwell

Early in November 2009, while I was pondering this chapter, news arrived that two great anthropologists – Claude Lévi-Strauss and Dell Hymes – had passed away. I had not initially thought of their work as particularly significant for historical anthropology, yet further reflection turned this contribution into an excellent opportunity to render tribute to them. Their loss rang a deep chord in me, as I recalled moments on the path I had followed toward integrating my early training in history with my later dedication to the anthropology of education. By drawing on them in this introduction, I hope to provide a historical grounding for my own argument, situated as it is in the latter half of the twentieth century and in the fruitful Latin American periphery of the field.

An early encounter with the work of Lévi-Strauss had provided many of us with a shield in the face of the pervading Eurocentric perspective that confused history with the presumption of a progressive evolution of mankind culminating in "Western" culture. As François Hartog summarizes Lévi-Strauss's argument in *Race et Histoire* (1952):

> in order to do justice to the diversity of cultures, one must begin by recognizing that all societies are within history, but also, that time is not the same for all ... The forms of civilization that we are made to imagine as "scaled in time" should rather be seen as "staged in space." (2005: 183, author's translation)

Lévi-Strauss interpreted the rich diversity of human symbolic expression as multiple transformations of basic cultural structures, but he was careful not to turn these into