

**BEYOND ALPHABETS: AN
INTERVIEW WITH STEPHEN A. TYLER**

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**Interviewed by Scott A. Lukas,
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Scott Lukas: I suggested this interview as a way of addressing some general themes which may be of interest to readers of POMO Magazine. Aside from addressing the "postmodern"--a sort of generalized center for this discussion--I hope to also ask some questions about your work in anthropology, your intellectual roots, your participation in the significant anthropological debates of the late eighties, and the ways in which your work has influenced thinking outside of anthropology. To begin with, I wanted to know how you first became interested in anthropology?

Steven Tyler: Well, actually through Asian studies. I was working on things like Buddhism and Hinduism and so forth. So I came in through the back door.

SL: Were there particular authors and texts which proved to be influential?

Tyler: In the beginning I was working with Douglas Haring at Syracuse University, and I read his textbook, *Personal Character and Cultural Milieu* (1949). That was an early text that certainly influenced me. The only other text in anthropology that I had even read before starting courses was Ruth Benedict's *Patterns of Culture* (1934).

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SL: Are there any of these authors whom you still read today, or have your tastes in anthropology changed?

Tyler: I don't think I've looked at Haring's book in a long time and I really don't have much interest in the whole field of "Culture and Personality" anymore. *Patterns of Culture*? No. The only person I can think of whom I would still read now, and someone I didn't read at that time when I was just getting started in anthropology, is Gregory Bateson. He was at the upstate New York medical center at the time. He was just working on the double bind theory of schizophrenia. I read *Naven* (Bateson 1958) fairly early on, and that's a book that I would return to.

SL: Who were some of the more interesting anthropologists with whom you attended the university?

Tyler: At Stanford there was a very active group when I first went there. Chuck Frake had just come a few years before; Kim Romney was there. I also took Bateson's seminar on communication since he had previously gone to Stanford a year or so before I had.

SL: And Ernest Becker?

Tyler: Yes, Ernie Becker I knew in Syracuse. We were actually graduate students together. Becker was two years ahead of me in the graduate program. I knew him very well. A really interesting guy. I liked Ernie a lot.

SL: What drew you to the study of kinship and linguistics?

Tyler: I think the sense of a method at that time. Linguists seemed to know what they were doing as opposed to most of the anthropologists who were slopping around in studies of enculturation and things of that sort which were not particularly intriguing. [laughs]

SL: You are of course known for your edited book *Cognitive Anthropology* (1969). This book remains influential in some anthropology programs among cognitive anthropologists. What prompted the shift in thinking from this book to later works like *The Said and the Unsaid* (1978), *The Unspeakable* (1987), and more recently your article, "Mneme Critique of Cognitive Studies" (1994)?

Tyler: What prompted the shift was the realization that people in cognitive studies were extremely limited in their understanding of the role of

language, and that most of it was posited on what struck me as being a very one-dimensional, referential notion about how meanings were accomplished with very little attention to even sociolinguistics. It was one of the other fields emerging at the time and there was very little contact between the two. It just seemed to me that as things developed, the material in cognitive anthropology became more and more narrow and specialized in terms of just looking at lexical fields and so on. On the other hand it began to be co-opted by the emergence of cognitive studies generally.

SL: Were there any other events or texts which led to your rejection of the main foundations of cognitive studies and a later embracing of a postmodern approach in anthropology and the social sciences?

Tyler: One of the things that ultimately pushed me out of the narrow conception of cognitive anthropology was a much closer, deeper reading of [Ludwig] Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (1953). Also, just working through some of my own textual material that I had gathered, I began to see where the real limitations were in the whole cognitive enterprise.

SL: This is the Koya material (Tyler 1973)?

Tyler: Right.

SL: Do you see any of the old assumptions and metaphysical foundations of cognitive studies reemerging in the new discourse on science, technology and virtual systems?

Tyler: Oh yeah, I think so. I think there are some of the same kinds of problems repeating. On the one hand, we have the idea of discourse as an object that you can tease apart and look at constitute parts and treat it as this decomposable object. Sure.

SL: And in the new talk on cyborgs or the new virtual metaphors, you have said that these metaphors are-

Tyler: Yeah, they are playing with the same old structures. And one of them obviously--The Network--is simply the matrix; the matrix now extended to a universal context. And of course the whole notion of the matrix with all of its Cartesian implications is something that is not very interesting in terms of postmodern critique.

SL: Your ethnography, *India: An Anthropological Perspective* (1973), might be classified as a "traditional ethnography" with a holistic perspective, an emphasis on social structure, and a generally third person perspective. What sort of decisions informed your writing of this text?

Tyler: I wrote it principally as a text for a general course on India. Also, I was still trying to work out a resolution between structuralism and cognitive anthropology at the time. It seemed to me that they really weren't different, except by nuance. A part of what I was doing there was a combination of structuralism and cognitive kinds of things, but at the same time fully realizing that what I was doing was a construction; even in the way of setting it up in terms of a Hegelian notion of thesis, antithesis and synthesis was obviously an overt construction of which I was fairly conscious. I was aware that this was something I was constructing as an image of the culture of India.

SL: How would you today address the changes that have undergone anthropology in writing a contemporary ethnography? We certainly have some new trends, but I am wondering what sort of conditions and stylistic choices you might suggest as informing the writing of less logocentric ethnographies?

Tyler: Let me say, in general I am somewhat disappointed in the kind of thing that is being put out now as ethnography, because there is no relationship to postmodernism as far as I can see. It's mainly a continuation of a lot of old modernist ideas that ethnographers have now finally realized as modes that can be used for textualization. In terms of postmodernism, there's not much that I can point to in anthropology that is very interesting to me.

SL: How about "messy texts" (Marcus 1994), multi-sitedness (Marcus 1995), reflexivity and positioning, advocacy, bifocality, critical juxtapositions, and discursive anthropology?

Tyler: Yeah. Well, some of those have a kind of postmodern ring to them, but I don't see most of those things really being worked out in the texts themselves. Reflexivity, it seems to me, is an old-timey idea. I have very little sympathy for the critical take, because part of the idea is that critique is innocent. And I don't think critique is innocent at all.

SL: And multi-sitedness?

Tyler: The multi-sitedness, it turns out, is largely fake, because the texts always turn out to be written for a Western audience or an anthropological audience. All of these attempts to include different perspectives--among which is supposed to be the perspective of the native informant--they all turn out to be under the control of the author of the text. I suppose that if there was a real joint authorship of some kind then the multi-sitedness might actually make some difference. As far as I can see now this is a hypocritical stance in which you say, "I'm being multi-sited here," but you're not really being multi-sited. This is the kind of argument that I had with dialogical anthropology.

SL: The late eighties remain significant years in anthropology, if only for the controversy generated from a number of books published and later labeled as the beginnings of a "postmodern" trend in anthropology. Here I am referring to *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986), *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* (Marcus and Fischer 1986), *The Unspeakable* (Tyler 1987) and *The Predicament of Culture* (Clifford 1988). What was it about these texts that set off such a firestorm in anthropology and other disciplines? And why have these texts, and your works in particular, become emblematic of the "postmodern"?

Tyler: That's a very interesting question because I don't think any of those texts really count as postmodern in any interesting sense. Most of what is in *Writing Culture*, for example, or in either of the other two texts, is really modernist themes that are taken up and trotted out as experimental works. The whole notion of experimental is a modernist notion, and it doesn't really seem to articulate particularly well with the postmodern. Many of them are carryovers between the modern and the postmodern. It's a matter of emphasis and execution. And why they caused such a reaction? Well, I think in part there are two things. One, there was a general sense around at the time that things had gotten fairly sterile. There was a situation where something new was already anticipated. The other thing is that there has been a general loss of confidence in a lot of disciplines in terms of what they think they can do, and also in terms of what they can now get paid to do. The cutoff in funding has had an awakening effect. The other thing that is interesting is that the texts themselves were in part received negatively, but also they were received very positively. A lot of people responded positively to the material, got interested in it, and began developing textual material and discourse in lines with these texts. So in part one of the appeals of the texts is that they really weren't that much of a break with the past. Though, from the point of view of people who were committed to a narrow scientific view of things, they were obviously an anathema. But for a lot of other people

who were already involved in things like symbolic anthropology or even cognitive studies, these were not extreme departures in any sense. They were simply carrying out some kinds of possibilities that were already adumbrated in a lot of other work. And in this sense that explains why they got these receptions.

SL: Some critics of *Writing Culture* cite its articles as "postmodern" for their explicit attention to texture, form, language and text (Mascia-Lees, Sharpe & Cohen 1989:9), yet one would be hard pressed to consider such approaches as either new or postmodern.

Tyler: That came about in part advantageously because "postmodernism" was used several times within the text; there are several references to it in the text itself. And also postmodernism was around at the time being openly discussed. On the one hand there is a claim--not a really forceful claim--a claim was made that this was about postmodernism. On the other hand there was a context of postmodern discussion emerging fully at that time. These texts then simply got caught up in that whole context.

SL: In line with that issue, one of the other critiques of *Writing Culture* was that anthropology is more than just "writing up" (Mascia-Lees, Sharpe & Cohen 1989:33). Anthropologists need to pay attention to the "field," because *it* is now all that we have left. Is there still a sense of the "field" in anthropology?

Tyler: The "field" in which sense? The field where anthropologists are supposed to go out and do their fieldwork?

SL: Exactly.

Tyler: That field! That strikes me as being one of the interesting things that happened--the abandonment of the idea of the field. Abandonment of the field but not abandonment of the idea of the field. And the reconstituting of the idea of the field not as a place of physical removal and exotic locale, but the idea of the field as being all around you somehow. It's a breakdown of that fundamental division between the anthropologist and his or her own culture and the anthropologist who goes out to some exotic area and comes back with reports about strange customs. The reconstitution of the idea of the field as not being localized in a foreign exotic but the constitution of everything as exotic. The idea of the exotic invades the idea of the ordinary. The excuse then for anthropologists is, "Well I don't really have to go anywhere anymore; the exotic is all around me." [laughs]

SL: Some have argued that anthropology's humanist project had drifted in the late eighties. In other words, some critics have suggested that the "new" ethnography "must embed its theory in a grounded politics" not simply in textual practices and experimentation (Mascia-Lees, Sharpe & Cohen 1989:28). What is your opinion?

Tyler: I'm not very sympathetic with any of the politics-type arguments. I didn't like them in the days of Neomarxism and I don't like them particularly now. What is assumed as a universal set of conditions by such commentary--not only commentaries from feminists but also from other groups as well--is the idea that there are really three universal categories of understanding or explanation, and these are either race, class or gender, and that all of these are political. This is now a part of what I would call the anthropology of Occidentalism in which the assumption is that no matter what group you're talking about or what the circumstance is, that it can always be reduced to some political interests that manifest themselves around these three characteristics. And I find that to be a simple-minded version of functionalism--the idea that everything is a function in one way or another of these kinds of things.

SL: What about James Clifford's statements concerning feminist anthropological approaches in the introduction to *Writing Culture*? His statement that "feminism had not contributed much to the theoretical analysis of ethnographies as texts...[nor had it] produced either unconventional forms of writing or a developed reflection on ethnographic textuality" (Clifford 1986:20, 21) certainly created a great deal of the controversy which would follow the publications of the late eighties. Was there exclusion at the Santa Fe School of American Research which spawned the book?

Tyler: I don't think there was any particular exclusion that I can think of. There was a question--it came up in discussion several times--about what ethnographic text inspired by feminism could one cite either manifesting what one could call experimental textuality or manifesting something in the nature of a mode of writing that was explicitly influenced by feminist understanding. As I recall at the time, one could mention certain texts that were interesting in the sense of the material. There was never any instance at that time of a text that manifested one of the implicit claims that there is or ought to be a particularly feminist mode of understanding and writing that would be available as an ethnography. As far as I knew at the time there were none that fell into this category, even though I was aware that there was a claim that there was such writing. But I don't think

there was any sense of trying to exclude, certainly not in my case since I didn't have anything to do with making the decision about who was or wasn't included in the conference anyway.

SL: What reflections do you have on the discussions which occurred at the School of American Research? I am also curious as to why none of the discussion comments of the assembled scholars made it into the *Writing Culture* text? Today it is popular and interesting to include such comments at the ends of articles or perhaps as running side columns throughout texts.

Tyler: As I recall there was no discussion of this at the closing part of the session. I think this was largely an editorial decision on the part of George [Marcus] and Jim [Clifford] as far as I know. I too thought there should have been something of that sort. If you recall in the last part of the piece that I wrote ["Post-Modern Ethnography" (1986)], I faked a kind of interaction.

SL: With the numbers?

Tyler: Right. The series of questions and comments as if these had been made by somebody in the seminar. That was just a piece of invention to parody the whole idea of the seminar discussion.

SL: Does that suggest that the discussions were not of interest?

DT: No, there were interesting comments though I must say that in lots of cases, a lot of the discussion tended to fall back into what I considered to be fairly traditional kinds of commentary.

SL: Another batch of criticisms of *Writing Culture* have focused on its cover. The cover I am describing is the picture, taken by Martha Tyler, of you in the "field" in 1963. This photograph has produced a number of observations, which I might here briefly quote for some context: [concerning this photo], "Tyler might be in the field, he is certainly not of it; rather, he is completely self-absorbed" (Howes 1991:72). bell hooks writes, "one sees in this image a white male sitting at a distance from darker-skinned people, located behind him; he is writing...I fix my attention on the piece of cloth that is attached to the writer's glasses, presumably to block out the sun; it also blocks out a particular field of vision...[it calls attention to] the white male as writer/authority, presented in the photograph actively producing, and the idea of the passive brown/black man who is doing nothing, merely looking on...the face of the brown/black woman is

covered up, written over by the graphics which tell the readers the title of the book and its authors" (hooks 1990:126-128). Other comments address the lack of discussion of the photographer and graphic designer (Kratz 1994:182). How might you address these criticisms?

Tyler: Well I had originally used this photograph--the cover--for my own paper at the conference and I certainly had in mind some of these things: here I am sitting with my back turned to the guy, and I had in mind Clifford Geertz's notion of the anthropologist reading the text of the culture over the native's shoulder. And here the opposite: the native is now reading, but he couldn't read what I was writing. He seems to be looking over my shoulder as I am writing. And of course the idea is that I'm doing this writing with the native behind me and I'm not interacting with the native, which was part of my whole critique of the idea of writing ethnographies--the practice of writing itself which excludes the voice of the native. In a sense some of the critics picked up on what was deliberately intended by me in choosing this photograph. First of all, the emphasis on the act of writing itself and the way in which that is an act that is carried on in private away from the natives who supposedly inform the text. A lot of those things that they picked on were absolutely right and that's why I used the picture. As far as the woman getting blotted out by the title of the text, as I said I didn't have any control over that so I can't take any responsibility for that. As far as the photographer, who was my wife, she composed the picture, and took it, and I appropriated it. Not much can be said about that it seems to me.

SL: Were there other photos that were considered?

Tyler: I think there were, but both George [Marcus] and Jim [Clifford] had liked this photo when I used it as part of my original presentation. By the way, there is one thing--she is absolutely wrong about blotting out the sun; it's not what the cloth was there for. The cloth was wet; it was there to humidify my head, not there to blot out. It may have blotted out but it was there mainly because it was bloody hot! [laughs]

SL: Perhaps we might move to a discussion of your piece from *Writing Culture* and *The Unspeakable*, "Post-Modern Ethnography: From Document of the Occult to Occult Document" (Tyler 1986). Of the ten other articles in the collection, some have suggested that your piece is the most experimental text. Others have remarked that it is again the exemplar of "postmodern" anthropology. What is the relationship of this piece to the others in the text, and what sort of dialogues and

discontinuities came forth in the discussions of it and the other pieces at the Santa Fe seminar?

Tyler: I think most people didn't like it at the seminar. In part they didn't like it because of the way I trammed history. And they also didn't like it in the sense that they felt it was too much a departure from ordinary writing practices. I think it generally was not well received at the seminar.

SL: So it was considered too experimental in comparison to the other pieces?

Tyler: I think so. It was seen at the seminar as being too far out.

SL: The critique of *Writing Culture's* textuality has been most feverishly applied to your piece. One critic has called your article incomprehensible: "[it] fails because it confuses its readers. It presents no frame that a reader of anthropology would expect in the context of anthropology, and it provides few markers for what the frame truly is...Tyler confuses readers by placing poetry in a context in which readers would expect prose frames" (Birth 1990:554, 555). Concluding, this author states, "Tyler shows no sensitivity to his readers. Instead, he expects an extraordinary level of competency from them" (ibid:555). Paul Stoller has called your piece "a mangrove swamp [which includes]: a profusion of Greek terms...a profusion of neologisms...a profusion of ironic syntax...the use of homophony to focus on etymological affinities and differences" (Stoller 1991:105). What is your reply?

Tyler: Sure. I was deliberately trying to do different things. Some of the things that Stoller points to I did use...deliberately. I felt that what we were supposed to be talking about was different ways of understanding the whole business of ethnographic writing. It seemed to me that part of what was in question was first of all the whole idea of the absolute distinction between prose and poetry. Also what was being questioned was the idea that there was a distinct genre that was necessary and *the* only way in which one could go about writing about other people. It seemed that all of these possibilities were up for grabs, and if you're really going to be experimental about it then you ought to try some of the experimental things that were already out there as well as trying to invent a few of your own. As far as not being kind to my readers...well, my first reaction is, tough! And my second reaction is that if you're reading something which takes the idea of the text itself as its object, then you have to expect that there is going to be some difficulty because of the self-referential character of it. Moreover, there is going to be difficulty if

you then take that self-referential aspect itself and turn that into the object of your understanding. You're going to get deeper and deeper into these various levels of reflexivity. Personally I think it's an easy piece to read. It never struck me as being particularly hard to read or understand. I only think that it would be hard to read or understand if what you were looking for is the kind of crap that appears regularly in most anthropology texts--this pseudo clear style which is supposed to reveal everything in its own clarity but disguises everything as a result of the kind of writing it really is. It's a question of what's being hidden where and how. In the case of the supposedly normal everyday text, things are being hidden in conventional ways that we have learned not to question. Now we know to question those. If you come at it from the point of view of an ordinary old text, sure it's probably hard to read.

SL: Others have suggested that your work's appeal to poetry and aesthetics allows no room for a political ethnography (Scholte 1987:41). Although your piece is definitely concerned with aspects of experimental writing, do you think it displays poetic or performative language? And what is the connection between the comments that explicitly associate realist writing with leftist/humanist political action?

Tyler: I guess there is a kind of poetics to it, but what I had in mind was that the work just engaged in a reversal of the fundamental tropes and genres of discourse. Rather than being a theoretical discourse or a realist discourse, now we're going to do a poetic discourse; now we're going to do aesthetics instead of theory, and now we're going to do politics. My idea was that all of those distinctions were already suspect, and that you didn't just simply want to fall back into one or the other: now I'm doing politics; theory is just an excuse for failing to acknowledge the political realities. I thought that was simple-minded and I still think it's simple-minded. And you couldn't just say, now we're going to do aesthetics because aesthetics is the opposite of theory, and so we've gone now to the opposite pole, and so now everything is now a kind of poetic. My idea was that if you simply stay within the boundaries of genres--as defined by those three tropes--then that is pretty stupid. What you want to do is either crosscut across all of those or to simply try to write in such a way that you weren't doing any of them. You couldn't be fit into any one of those categories easily. The attempt to fit this into poetics was obviously a way of trying to dismiss it by saying, it just fits in the realm of aesthetics. It's not the real stuff; it's not really politics; it's not really theory; it's just this aesthetic stuff. I understand where that critique is coming from and what it's meant to do. What I would argue in response is that it's just totally off the mark.

SL: Jean Baudrillard suggests that he writes as a way of "bringing illusion into play...where it can still utter without having to signify" (Baudrillard 1993b:179). For Baudrillard and other writers--perhaps Avital Ronell, Arthur Kroker and Gloria Anzaldúa--there is present the idea that the form or style of one's writing is as or more important in some ways than what one has to say within it (cf. Baudrillard 1993b:171). I am then curious as to how you would describe your style of writing. How conscious are you about the ways in which you write?

Tyler: I'm fairly conscious of what I write, though I would deny that I'm in control most of the time. There is an illusion that you are in control of your own text, but it turns out that it is often not the case. One of the things that I like to play around with are figurations in a different sense--figurations in a more literal sense where you use diagrams, what I like to call thought pictures. There is a double reason for doing that. One is that I want to parody the whole idea of the visual as the principal mode of representation and understanding in Western discourse generally. The other is that I want to index another kind of writing in which we really take seriously the notion of the picture. If you were to take it to the extreme, what you would have would be a picture with some captions and a few imperative phrases here and there. I wouldn't take it that far myself, but that's the general idea. It's like playing around with the idea of picto- logo- photo- graphie that Derrida talked about at one time, and then really trying to do it in a way.

SL: The association of your article with aesthetics and poetics seems strange since I believe that you are very critical of wholesale adoptions of poetic and aesthetic modes. How would you reflect today on the proliferation of metaphors like "performativity" and "poesis"?

Tyler: The performance trope is an interesting one because it pretends not to be a textualization. It also tries to respond to the idea of not making a representation. What I tend to think however is that there are two things. One of them is that it tends to be very politically informed often, and so I tend to mistrust it a little bit from that point of view. The other thing is that it tends to occur in the kinds of contexts where there is usually just a small coterie of people who witness it. And then what it does is to engender a textual response of some kind, so that ultimately it falls back into the world of textuality for its justification and legitimation. That's not to say that I'm totally unhappy with the notion of performativity, because I think that it makes a lot of sense to look at what has happened to the idea of writing within our own culture and the ways in which performance has begun to

substitute for writing, particularly in scientific discourse where textualization is only an afterthought in a lot of disciplines. The main thing is the actual performance of what they call "giving a paper" but there's usually no paper involved; there are maybe slides and stuff written on the blackboard. There is a real sense that performativity is where things are going on, and textualization has become this secondary, tertiary phenomenon. It's only a way of keeping score. Unlike the performance studies stuff itself, it doesn't require a final legitimization in text. It requires its legitimization in another performance. One can say that is kind of an aesthetic. It's like the idea of the art work for which the only appropriate response to it was another work of art. The only appropriate response to a scientific performance is another scientific performance. In that same sense you would say that is a case of total aestheticization within science. I don't know if you would want to press it that far, but if you were bloody-minded you might.

SL: Some have been excited with the idea of "surrealist ethnography" or a "surrealist" approach to the study of culture. What is your view?

Tyler: I've never been particularly wild about the idea of surrealism as a mode of ethnographic writing. I think that it is more of a case that surrealism is like a primer. It's good for you to read surrealism and think about it and then go ahead and do your own work rather than trying to be a surrealist ethnographer. Again it's partly my bias against everything modern. Surrealism picked up and exemplified so many of the themes of modernism that I'm suspicious of it having any kind of direct utility in postmodernism.

SL: Why then have "montage" and "collage" gained so much attention in the late eighties?

Tyler: I think one of the reasons is that they have the obvious cache of technique: here is a method, and this is how you can do it. If you want to do experimental stuff just montage some stuff here. It has all the appeal of an explicit form of method.

SL: You have also suggested that simply changing the form of writing will not eradicate the metaphysics of writing and of LANGUAGE (Tyler 1987:43), so in most ways surrealism seems to be inadequate in offering anything new to ethnography other than perhaps, as you say, fashion. Also, in terms of *Writing Culture's* suggestions concerning surrealism and avant-garde aesthetics, there is the problem of only focusing on obvious centers like "collage" and "montage" without acknowledging other avant-

garde writing techniques (cf. Tomas 1992:15). Aside from surrealist suggestions, what sort of experimental ethnographic texts would interest you? Could one write an ethnography keeping in mind some of the suggestions of your "Post-Modern Ethnography"?

Tyler: There are the obvious things that one can do to make the ethnography more responsive to a variety of things. To make the ethnography more responsive to the people that it is supposed to be about, that certainly is one thing. There are a variety of things that can be done that range from cooperative writing projects. The cooperation could take a variety of forms: either written cooperatively, or the text sent back and corrected; anything in which the people who are being written about have some active input into the text itself. Another possibility would be writing a countertext-a critical response. That of course presumes that you have a literate audience that can respond to a text in that way. So that if you were working with what anthropologists used to work with in the good old days--a nonliterate tribal group--you have a different problem as to how you then establish this more cooperative text. One way of doing it would be to go back to the very old fashioned Franz Boas technique of the text that your native puts together. You simply translate it with various commentaries, your notes, endnotes and so on and make relatively little claim beyond that as to being the author of the text. Now the other end of the scale however is the audience for whom the text is produced. Here again most of the experimental writing has simply fudged on this question. The texts are produced for a relatively small audience of anthropological readers and there is some posturing toward the idea that the text is written for the people. But for the most part you simply have to face the fact that most of these texts are written as were all other standard ethnographies. They were written to be digested by other anthropologists, and there is still a legitimation that says, "OK this may be an experimental ethnography, but look here, it'll still fit into the data bank of ethnographies and be part of the general record of human culture." That old kind of scientific, enlightenment legitimation. There is a kind of hypocrisy in place. Another idea is that this is a piece of writing that will be used to empower the people about whom it is written...well, maybe though I suspect most cases not. Empower them to do what? There are even ideas that creating texts of this kind enables the people to acquire a kind of double-vision that we sophisticated Westerners have of seeing ourselves as objects and at the same time understanding ourselves as subjects. And so we're going to give that blessing to the people by means of our texts. In general I don't see anything particularly interesting in the kinds of experimental ethnography I've seen.

SL: What about automatic writing, dadaist poetry, pataphysics or chance operations?

Tyler: Chance operations, sure. I think one could do that. The only problem with that, as you know if you've ever tried it, is you get the kind of complaints that I got about that piece (Tyler 1986): this is just a welter of things that have no connections. And automatic writing, again I don't know. It's a technique that you can try, but I'm not sure what...

SL: It's very psychological.

Tyler: Right.

SL: How about "Happenings"? ["Many shoppers begin to whistle in aisles of supermarket. After a few minutes they go back to their shopping" (Kaprow 1995:231)]. Do you think a technique like the "Happening" could, aside from unsettling a given social situation, allow us to rethink any of the interconnections of ethnographic activity and performance?

Tyler: Well I think it would. Though I'm not sure what one would do. Would there be a description of it, or would it be the script of a Happening which is of course an oxymoron? The script before or after the fact, it's no longer a Happening in the same sense.

SL: Right. [Victor] Turner constructed a number of situations in which Western students re-performed Ndembu social dramas (cf. Turner 1982).

Tyler: Yeah. One of the issues here that is not clearly addressed is the issue of what is the ethnography for anyway? One idea is that there should only be one thing that it is for. It seems to me that now what we should be able to say about ethnography is that they could be for a lot of things, and no ethnography has to be for any one thing, and there is no particular form that an ethnography has to have. The whole idea of a governing form for ethnography is no longer a very interesting idea. It's a kind of idea where you can even now go back and write like [W.H.R.] Rivers (1906) if you want to. There's no reason why you shouldn't.

SL: Do you think our conception of ethnography has changed since *Writing Culture*?

Tyler: I think in some senses it has changed, in ways that are not particularly important. One idea is the self-conscious act of writing. The other one is the notion of reflexivity. And the other thing that follows from

these are the obvious modernist techniques like montage and so on. But there has been relatively little questioning of the idea of the audience.

SL: To close the discussion of performance and anthropology, we might address how there have been shaky theoretical connections between critical anthropology and performance art/studies. Performance studies people want to borrow "ethnography" to relegitimize their work, while anthropologists want to use "performance" to reenchant their texts. Do you think we can move beyond this parasitical state or does the structure of the academy suggest otherwise?

Tyler: Well it certainly interferes, I don't know if it prevents. If you start off with the assumption that you are still going to create a text, there is now a really advantageous situation. We could make a text anyway we want to. We're not constrained by any particular form. We could be eclectic, borrow from whomever we want too. And also there is no necessary sense that you have to put together a beautiful aesthetic object or an integrated whole of some kind. It's not so much that the text would be messy, though I suspect it would, but that the text itself could contain so many different forms of textualization that it could cross any number of genre possibilities or incorporate all kinds of stuff like performance studies and other things as well. We should also begin to think about--even though I think there are limitations--CD-ROM and interactive texts. If ethnographers really want to be experimental why don't they try some of that stuff?

SL: You have more than any other anthropologist addressed not simply the making of texts (rhetoric, etc.) but the "being" of texts, the idea that we are still, as ethnographers, caught up in the play of Subject-Verb-Object. In trying to move out of this cycle I am particularly interested in what I will for clarity today state as tropes you have offered in your writings. These include: denying theory (Tyler 1987:xi), giving to a verb not a noun (ibid:26), from matrix to hierogram and rebus (ibid:37, 42), from mimetic writing to communication and dialogue (ibid:55, 59), from textuality to pictorial and performative communication (Tyler 1993a:7), speech's "outer flow" (Tyler 1987:197), recovery of orality (Tyler 1993a:27), and most recently the middle voice (Tyler 1995a). Could you talk about the movement of these tropes, their relations to "Post-Modern Ethnography," and their potentials for future ethnographic writing?

Tyler: All of them are ideas that I meant to get through to some other form of not just writing, some other form of communicating. All focus on issues where it is clear that normal writing practices hide, cover up or obscure

these kinds of issues. So all of them are meant to address in one way or another what I perceive as being impediments in what I would now characterize as the normal form of writing, even some of the experimental kinds. And so each of them addresses what I have understood to be a problem area in the idea of writing.

SL: If you were to organize a more radical or postmodern session of the *Writing Culture* seminar, what sorts of ideas, texts and individuals would you build on? In other words, I am curious as to how one might seriously address the questions of the "outer flow," the middle voice, postmodern ethnography and experimental writing in manners attending to the possible connections of anthropologists and other postmodern workers?

Tyler: There are a number of possibilities. One would be to assemble a group of people and simply prohibit them from writing the kind of things they usually write, saying, "OK you can't write that." And then give them a list of some of these things and say, "I want you to write using half a dozen of these." Or thinking about these and trying to write something. The other possibility would be the use of technological goo-gas like doing part of it on-line or tape recording and erasing half of what you recorded. These are things you could play around with. I'm not sure that they would be very productive, but anything to break up the tendency to fall back into these normal ways of representing is interesting.

SL: Two other concepts which you address in your work are therapy and parody. How does either move writers and readers away from theory and textualization as usual?

Tyler: The idea of therapy is that first of all somebody is sick. And it seems to me that there is a kind of a sickness about writing. The whole idea of thinking about therapy was to make you think not about the idea of knowledge production -producing knowledge that will be useful mainly for producing other knowledge. The idea was that there is a kind of therapy that could work in either direction: it's a therapy for the guy that writes the text and it could also be therapy for someone who reads it; not in the sense that it's going to make their life any better in ameliorating their political problems, but that it could be something like a vehicle for meditation so that you simply used it as a way to focus your mind or something of that sort. Therapy makes it sound too important maybe; it's a much humbler task. It's no longer this task of providing a huge chunk of truth and pushing back the frontiers of knowledge.

SL: Does this grow from your work with Martha Tyler on therapeutic settings (Tyler and Tyler 1986)?

Tyler: Sure does.

SL: I had the feeling that you had some cynicism in terms of the role of rhetoric in therapeutic settings.

Tyler: Yeah, the rhetoric of therapeutic discourse I am cynical about.

SL: So these are two different projects.

Tyler: These are two different things, but they grow out of my involvement with the people of family therapy.

SL: In terms of your uses of parody, Jean Baudrillard's discussion of "objective irony" might be an interesting point of comparison. In *Fatal Strategies* Baudrillard addresses the revenge of the Evil Genie of the Object on the Subject-the human preoccupied with self and possession (1990). In Baudrillard's world reversal, we have at once a complete deflation of human agency and the reemergence of an enchantment, a ceremony of the nonhuman world. Do you see any relationship between Baudrillard's deployment of parody and irony and his negation of analysis and some of your own suggestions for the future of language, writing and ethnographic activity?

Tyler: Sure. I think the whole issue of the parodic has a direct relationship with Baudrillard and some of my own work. In a way it's almost redundant to parody ethnography because ethnography is already parodic. On the other hand if the parodic has a certain power then it gets your attention in a way that other things don't. And it's not just because of the cheap ironic shot that says, "Oh it's awful that it turned out this way, there's nothing we can do about it."

SL: Because there is a lot of that in realist ethnography.

Tyler: Right.

SL: In connection, recently you have written an article, "Them Others-Voices Without Mirrors" (1995b), which partially reflects on Baudrillard's discussion of the Other from *The Transparency of Evil* (1993a). How did Baudrillard's writings influence your piece?

Tyler: I think Baudrillard's reading of the radical Other--which can't be reduced to the idea of difference and you can't simply domesticate the Other in the direct, overt ways that anthropologists have been inclined to do--is significant. You can't just say, "now I understand the Other." As Baudrillard says, the act of understanding is itself the worst kind of pretension. You are no longer dealing with the Other as Other at all. You've totally domesticated it.

SL: This is like your Nefertiti quote: "I dreamt I was Queen Nefertiti and I was making love to her" (Tyler 1995b:2).

Tyler: Exactly. There is something that goes through all of the philosophical discourse on the Other, and to see what people were trying to do was to thematize the Other in some way, and that very act of thematization then creates the Other not as an Other but as a Same. The whole discussion then was what are the means by which that thematization has taken place?, and then a denial that the thematization actually does what it purports, which is to say it converts the Other into something which is now domesticated as the Other-understood.

SL: I had also hoped to discuss your notion of "evocation" from *The Unspeakable*. Could you comment on the genesis of this concept and how it could potentially inform future ethnographic writing?

Tyler: In part it's playing around with looking at the different genres. One could say that one of the things that political discourse does is it provokes some action. That provocation hinges on the use of the root voc- which is to voice, to speak out, speak for. I thought that it's interesting that there is no voice term for theory, so there is a kind of voicelessness by the time you get to theoretical discourse. So then I started playing around with these, and it seemed that another possibility was the idea of evocation, in which you weren't trying to get anyone to do something; you weren't trying to describe something; and you weren't making any claims about knowing anything. Nor were you making really any claims about anything being there. I think some people mistook the idea somewhat for the notion that in trying to write evocatively you were trying to bring out something that was already in the reader's mind. That was not my understanding. My idea was that you might well do that--you might evoke something that was there, hidden or forgotten--but more importantly the act of reading itself would evoke something that was maybe unknown to the reader himself or herself. It was this evocative process that was being aimed at rather than the production of knowledge or the production of action--getting someone to act in a particular way--or even the production of an

aesthetic response. The evocative response might be aesthetic or it could be any kind. You weren't trying to control the reader's response.

SL: Is there a mystical connection in evocation?

Tyler: Well there can be. From the point of view of any analytic understanding, what goes on when something is imaginatively created out of the process of reading is that which you can't trace to your own mental machinations or to experience or whatever. That has to fall within, for us, the domain of the mystical. By definition we have excluded it from ordinary experience. I myself don't think it has to be. I think that's why we are imposing on evocation a rigid interpretation of what it means for something to be evoked. We say, "OK, well if it doesn't fit that then it has to be mystical."

SL: How important is a generalized mysticism to the postmodern?

Tyler: I think it's very important. The idea of mystery itself is absolutely necessary to the postmodern...mystery in a positive sense. It's not mystery in the negative sense of not knowing; it's mystery in the sense of the mystery that informs. It informs you not by giving you a kind of discursive knowledge. It's a mystery that informs you by enabling you to think in-between things.

SL: What about poetic or aesthetic terrorism and art sabotage as Hakim Bey would have it? We should boycott all "lite" products, Bey argues, like beer, meat, lo-cal candy, cosmetics and music (Bey 1991:53), and we might smash the machinery of MUZAK as it is "designed to hypnotize & control" (ibid:12). Perhaps this is one way of dealing with realist ethnography-our own MUZAK? How seriously would you take this?

Tyler: In general I don't respond positively to the idea of terrorism, even as a kind of trope. You might think to yourself, "I'm going to manhandle all of this crap in the following way." At the same time you have to realize that for many people this may very well be the means of their evocation. You can't assume this dictatorial vision-to say that it only happens this way and you have to do it this way. This seems to me to be part of the problem with Hakim Bey's terrorism. Queer as it may sound, for some people MUZAK may really do it for them.

SL: It is obvious that "postmodernism," "postmodernity" and "postmodern" have been used rather loosely. Is there any sense you have

of "postmodern" approaches or a "condition of postmodernity" or are we best served by letting "pm" die as another "ism" of the 1980s?

Tyler: There have also been demands for a definition of it...what are the ends of it?, which totally goes against the idea of the postmodern. Postmodernism sets itself up as the undefinable. Rather than try to fix it in some way or another, I would say just let it disappear...if that's the only alternative.

SL: For some the word has potentially positive associations. Conducting this interview for this journal, *POMO Magazine*, reflects a such positive use of the metaphor I think. The journal doesn't attempt to define either historically or epistemologically what "postmodernity" is or what a "postmodern" approach might resemble. Instead, it offers an ability for scholars from diverse fields to come together and present critical, often conflicting views of socio-cultural phenomena. Such an approach allows us to make the sort of anti- or multi-disciplinary movement which isn't allowed under the rubrics of other modernist metaphors and political alignments. Do you think that "pm" might be a sort of rallying cry for burned-out leftists, post-situationists, aesthetic terrorists and other such creatures?

Tyler: I think that's quite true.

SL: At this year's meetings of the American Anthropological Association, there was a session dedicated to the ongoing question of the division of anthropology into science and humanist/postmodernist camps. The real tragedy of the panel was that it spoke nothing to the dissolution of the polarities of this anthropological divide. How might we address the science-humanities chasm? Are we just left to speculate in our own "two cultures"?

Tyler: As long as it gets defined in terms of the old two cultures idea of humanism and science, then it's just totally fruitless. It's always going to be the case that the science types will say, "It's OK for you humanists to do the kind of little stuff you do as long as you don't make waves, but don't call it postmodernism because that begins to scare us." [laughs] You might reveal the fact that we're first of all not really doing what we say we're doing and secondly a lot of our work is informed by irrational ideas and illegitimate purposes for all kinds of reasons other than those that we would like to claim as being science. What we should continue to do is to go along and pretend that none of that happened. "So you humanists stay over there with your texts and don't pretend to make any critical

judgments about science in any way that would have to be taken seriously by anybody."

SL: So you don't see yourself participating in any such "two cultures" discussions?

Tyler: No. Not in that overt sense.

SL: There is the perception that the anthropology being done at Rice is of a perverse strain. Do you have any thoughts on the differences between Rice's anthropology program and other departments?

Tyler: The only big difference is that there is not much pretense around here anymore of trying to do anything like the old "four fields" in anthropology [cultural anthropology, archaeology, anthropological linguistics and biological anthropology], at least at the graduate level. That I suppose is one reason. There is an avowed purpose of focusing on critique and experimental writing, and that would be another difference. The other thing, however, is the way it has become institutionalized here is probably no different than other departments. In fact the whole process of institutionalizing some of the ideas that we had in the early eighties has really meant that things have gotten a lot less interesting than they were.

SL: What was the Rice Circle and what effects did it have on Rice's anthropology program (cf. Maranhao and Gillman 1986)?

Tyler: It was a lot of fun when we were doing it. It had a profound effect on the anthropology program in terms of what kinds of things we focused on, teaching, and the kinds of things we did with graduate students. I think the main thing about it was that while we were doing it at the Rice Circle it was really a lot of fun. It was interesting, exciting and we had a lot of interactions with people of a whole variety of disciplines. It was just a discussion group where everything was up for grabs. We were trying to reinterpret everything that pertained to ethnography or anthropology generally or to the larger questions about representation. Material from anywhere was acceptable. It was fun.

SL: Why did it disband?

Tyler: There are a lot of reasons. Jealousies among the participants for one. The final blow was to get money to support it. Once it became legitimized as something that somebody would give you money to do, it lost its charm.

SL: Are there considerable differences between the focus of Rice's anthropology program today as compared to the 1980s?

Tyler: I think there is some difference. First of all it's become a lot more normalized. Again I think it's reflected in the textual techniques of experimental ethnography. Students come in and they are provided with this list of the "how to do its" now, which wasn't there in the beginning. Nobody quite knew what sorts of things ought to be on the list.

SL: What are your reflections on end of the millennium collections, such as the *Late Editions* series (Marcus 1993)?

Tyler: To tell you the truth I've only read bits and pieces of one of them. I don't get any sense at all, but maybe I'm missing the point.

SL: I am interested in how such end of the millennium projects arise. Arthur Kroker's CultureTexts series, for example, is different.

Tyler: Much different. It's a lot yeastier kinds of stuff. Let me put it this way, maybe the fact that it's writing about the end of the millennium strikes me as being the only millenarian thing about this stuff. Well Kroker's stuff...a lot of it embodies more of the sense of fear and trembling at the brink.
[laughs]

SL: This is a general question based on your article, "Presenter (Dis)play," which looks at the rhetorical aspects of various modes of presentation in science and other areas (Tyler 1991). What is your assessment of the contemporary revival of rhetoric?

Tyler: I think it's very important but I'm not quite sure in what form. It's certainly not in its ordinary guise as either the discourse of persuasion or the rhetoric of inquiry, or the rhetoric of the text. Where I think it should be going is more in the direction of combined forms of presentation and so on.

SL: This question perhaps relates to your earlier mentioning of W.H.R. Rivers. Do you ever find yourself reading nineteenth-century ethnographies? George Catlin, the nineteenth-century realist painter and explorer, wrote about "Rain Makers" and the like (Catlin 1973:134). It is easy to chuckle at writers like Catlin, because now, as sophisticated ethnographers, we know the importance of writing reflexive, humanist works, taking everything into account. Could we be suspicious that even

after *Writing Culture*, feminist critiques and all the contemporary jargon (reflexivity, dialogism, etc.) that we are still writing "Rain Makers"? How far have we come?

Tyler: Well I agree with that. We haven't really come that far, I don't think so. We've become more attuned to the idea of how we are creating our texts as compared with nineteenth-century ethnography. In particular in a lot of the ethnography that was turned out under the British empire--by in some cases amateur ethnographers and in other cases political agents of the empire--there was a standard ethnographic form: people went out and made the observations that were appropriate for each of the chapter headings and so on. They had this very standardized product that didn't require a lot of authorial invention. It required filling in the blanks. A lot of nineteenth-century ethnography is like that except for the books that we would regard as some of the classics; they are classics either because they are the first ones that did it or because there is something either unusual in the way in which they did it or unusual among the people themselves--the content was arresting.

SL: I wanted to briefly address some miscellaneous topics. With your permission I thought I would list an idea or trope and get your brief or detailed reaction.

Tyler: OK.

SL: The first is *the body*.

Tyler: Oh well, yes. On the one hand the interest in the body has been used for a new kind of foundationalist discourse. I don't find it very interesting in that sense. This question also raises lots of interesting issues about the body as a symbolic vehicle. I find these issues kind of interesting. The whole idea that the body is foundational can be used then as a springboard for a new foundational discourse (cf. Tyler 1993b). I don't particularly find it interesting.

SL: *Cyborgs*.

Tyler: Again, the whole idea of the machine-body configuration in which presumably you get something totally hybrid which is neither, at the same time is both, is an interesting trope. I don't particularly like the whole idea of mechanization. What is being celebrated mainly in the cyborg is not the body but the cybernetic part.

SL: *Hypertext and the Internet.*

Tyler: These are a couple of fakey ideas. [laughs] The idea of a hypertext is that it is also directed. The idea of the associative connections between things is not really associative except in the sense of not being directly organized in terms of a lineal narrative. And the Internet. So far most of the stuff I have encountered on the Internet has not been particularly edifying. And if talk groups on the Internet are supposed to be the harbingers of the future, in which we finally realize our communicative competence, then I think we might as well forget it.

SL: *Rhizome* (cf. Deleuze and Guattari 1987).

Tyler: I like the idea because it directly confronts the arboreal metaphor in Western culture. I don't like it because it still continues the idea of something underneath, something underground, something covered up.

SL: *Culture critique.*

Tyler: Ah culture critique. It's an excuse for a lot of unhappy people to say rotten things about one another. [laughs]

SL: *Cultural studies and pop culture.*

Tyler: Well cultural studies has been completely engulfed with what I mentioned before-the idea that there are really only three great things that you need to know about anything, and they're all subsumed as aspects of politics, namely race, class and gender; and that explains everything. So I don't find cultural studies very edifying. Pop culture as an object is an interesting object. The whole movement to break down the distinction between pop culture and "real" culture is also an interesting move. It's a move that is politically motivated of course, but that's another issue.

SL: *Dialogic anthropology.*

Tyler: The idea is good in the sense of the metaphor of the dialogue. It's just that the way in which it has been worked out so far has been a failure I think.

SL: *Excess.*

Tyler: This is a really useful notion on the whole because it draws your attention to an interesting contrast with the idea of scarcity and the whole way in which the notion of scarcity is used as a trope to organize whole disciplines, such as economics for example.

SL: *Structuralism.*

Tyler: An interesting movement. One of the things that was going on in the seventies and the late part of the sixties. Caused a lot of fascination. Interestingly divided within itself: on the one hand giving a very scientific, mathematized appearance but at the same time being something totally other than that.

SL: *Anthropological field schools.*

Tyler: A total waste of time...the way of indoctrinating people in how to do things wrong.

SL: *Carlos Castaneda.*

Tyler: Another interesting case which really gave anthropologists indigestion because it pointed to the whole contested relationship of fiction and fact in anthropology. The fiction still probably resonates today.

SL: *Indeterminacy.*

Tyler: In general I guess if I were to have to choose between the two--between determinacy and indeterminacy--I would prefer the later.

SL: *Lyotard.*

Tyler: Very influential in many ways particularly in taking postmodernism to the forefront of people's imaginations. I haven't cared for some of his later works as much.

SL: *"Four fields" anthropology programs.*

Tyler: Well, it was a noble idea, but totally unworkable given the way in which the fields began to define themselves, and the way in which biological anthropology began to try and arrogate to itself a dominant position because of its seemingly closer relationship to biology without having anything of its own to contribute to biology. A parasitic

relationship which it then used as a way to establish its own hegemony within the discipline.

SL: *Bataille*.

Tyler: Nothing that I can point to as being a concept or an idea with the exception of the idea of "excess" maybe. He's somebody to read to get you to think about things.

SL: *Savages*.

Tyler: Anthropology is trying to make its way in a world without them.
[laughs]

SL: Would you say that your work has been misunderstood?

Tyler: Oh of course! Everyone thinks their work is. Sure. [laughs] Probably all for the better!

SL: Do you have any plans for future books, perhaps a collection of your latest articles?

Tyler: I do have a book that I have been working on for a certain amount of time but it's not going anywhere. I'm not sure what to do with it at this point. My standard joke about it is that it began with the title *The Unreadable*. Now I'm thinking about rechristening it as *The Unwriteable*.
[laughs]

SL: What do you see as the next trope in anthropology?

Tyler: Oh boy, what a good question. Probably something from the domain of the computer I would suspect. I'm not sure what it would be, but something out of that context.

SL: What's your next trope?

Tyler: Ah, I don't know it. If I knew I'd hence have that book done!
[laughs]

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