ON CONTRACT KNOWING:
Notes Toward a Taxonomy of Foreclosed Inquiry

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What distinctive limits on inquiry are imposed by contract work in anthropology? What specific dilemmas of knowing arise? Do these other ways and means of knowing pose distinctively contemporary Faustian dilemmas? How are they handled by anthropologists conducting such work? What means -- alternative research products, negotiated corrections, protective or bail-out clauses -- have been devised to deal with them? How well are the trials (the rewards? timeliness? impact?) of contract work appreciated in the discipline at large? How well taught? What follows is a rough, preliminary framework for addressing such questions.

The exploratory nature of this inquiry should be clear. In compiling these notes, I've taken a journalistic tack. I reviewed some literature, importuned friends and strangers in the field, tracked down new leads, interviewed practitioners, solicited written commentary (some of which led to written exchanges via internet and mail). I drew on my own experience in doing contract work (in housing, mental health and homelessness) for non-profit organization, law firms and government agencies (Census, NIMH, HUD, New York State and City). Except where citing published work, I report findings anonymously -- both because I didn't ask any "informants" for permission to identity them, and because to do so properly would have meant a much more time-consuming process of exchanging drafts and negotiating accuracy.

Then, too, some of this will partake of what Roger Shattuck (in a book, <u>Forbidden Knowledge</u>, 1996, that I will have occasion to cite further) calls "delicate knowledge" -- positions, speculations, opinions ventured for their potential (not demonstrated) worth, that I wanted to air in the interest of driving what seems to me a much-needed dialogue further. By provenance and quirk, then, these are personal notes for an inquest into contractually-hedged knowing.

Artisans and Proles? Misknowing at Home

This essay cannot get under way without some passing acknowledgment of the resentment felt by many anthropologists doing contract work of the disdain shown them by their academically-based colleagues. In hapless Candidian fashion, I inadvertently stirred things up with an author's query in the Jan. '97 <u>AN</u>. Intended as an open (if provocatively phrased) invitation to readers doing contract work to unload or unburden themselves of nagging concerns or stubborn quandaries, it initially provoked two kinds of responses: embattled accounts of professional rectitude in the face of corruption, exploitation, intellectual larceny and mentor betrayal; and angry denunciations of my stupidity and prejudice in floating the canard of dirty hands doing suspect work.

How real or extensive the disdain may be is difficult to gauge, but there is no discounting the sureness with which it is felt (see, e.g., <u>Practicing Anthrop</u>. 17(1-2), 1995). Some of it seems rooted in the perceived sanctimony of the academy researcher whose enabling funds come well-camouflaged, without strings, via foundations and cultivated patrons, and whose "summer salaries" carry them off to exotic places. But it's a good deal deeper than the resentment felt by people scrambling to put food on the table in the rough-and-tumble world of the agora, while colleagues quietly petition for grants in the cosseted precincts of the academic hearth. It has to do, I think, with the debased coinage of "deliverables" -- the notion that any inquiry not (at least mythically) driven by a disciplined intellectual curiosity of one' own making is a lesser undertaking. Under certain circumstances, too, some of it may stem from a lingering ambivalence toward collaboration with those same market-based forces, the globally destructive force of which was so much a part of our training too. Working under contract does not wipe out all memory of Tristes Tropiques.

Ironically, this plaint comes at a time when the academic workplace is becoming increasingly "flexible;" non-tenure track, part-time, and effectively "migrant" work are on the rise. Growing numbers of anthropologists are taking jobs in non-academic settings, or swing both ways. (Anyone publishing deals with contracts.) "Unless one signs on with the Devil or the Mafia," what's the big deal? asked one senior member of our tribe. "Is working in an organization any different from having to deal with colleagues demented about some theory or another. . .?"

At the very least, to understand this animus, we need to extend our own anthropological ethic (or what Scarry calls an act of generous imagining, but could begin with some straight conversation) to our own home precincts. Suffice it to say at this juncture that the storied distinctions between sainted ranks of Academic Pilgrims and benighted columns of Filthy Lucretians are fast fading and need rethinking (cf. Agar 1997).

Negotiated Limits and Ethical Constraints

With several exceptions, the AN discussions of the Known, Unknown and Unknowable to date, have dealt with the limits imposed by nature and history (the "boundary conditions" of the human faculties and tools employed, and irremediable gaps in data sought); with the misknown and correctable; with what cannot be grasped in a particular cultural frame, or with unplumbed depths of subjects or standpoints yet to be explored or employed (the world according to children, "uncredentialed" knowers, AIDS research, moral reasoning). They've focused chiefly on the unknown, mapping limits that might recede had we world enough and time. Less attention has been given to the unknowable or endlessly debatable -- "what forms of attachment to undependable external things a human life needs," for example, "in order to be complete, and whether one can have these without debilitating uncertainty" (Nussbaum, 1994).

The metes and bounds delimited here take us into territory largely ignored so far. For our purposes, contract knowing is purchased anthropological inquiry undertaken for specific aims, within a defined scope of work, under agreed-upon terms and conditions, to produce stipulated products according to a timetable. (See "A Conversation . . .," this issue.) I mean it to include much of non-academic anthropological employment as well.

Here the relevant limits are negotiated and imposed; they are deliberate, agreed to under enforceable terms; pre-emptive and unforeseen; artificial and (because agreeing to them is essential to being permitted to proceed) enabling. They concern the conduct of work, and so bear inevitably on professional ethics, personal morality and local politics. Broadly, they may be divided into negotiated or circumstantial limits to knowing (and/or sharing what is found out); and ethical constraints on knowing -- what, for a variety of reasons, ought not to be known (or, if known, ought not to be shared indiscriminately). The first kind of constraint has already been broached by the discussions of NAGPRA; the second, hardly unfamiliar, is remarkable so far by being mostly implied (e.g., obligation to correct error).

A Caution

Before describing examples of the above, I should note that a number of respondents cautioned against "victimizing" those who encounter problems in the contract world. The ethnographic perspective isn't easy to package in the prescriptive logic of contracts, but that doesn't absolve anthropologists of the charge to develop the skills needed to "negotiate relevance" (Yoder, 1997) in interdisciplinary or evaluative settings. The same scrutiny we bring to fields of "social influence" in unfamiliar cultures ought to be applied to contracting agents. Accommodating the client (even the World Bank and its borrowers), Horowitz (1996) argues, need not mean surrendering inclusive scope or critical edge; self-censorship on issues of class and power can yield a badly distorted picture of local poverty. Finding ways of applying disciplinary aptitude to locally valued problems, as in Meyer's work (1992) on knowledge acquisition in laboratory settings, yields the distinctive satisfactions of having worked through the vital compromises that consequential work in the "real world" so often entails. At best, "the force of economic necessity" may create novel "ecologies of knowledge" that transcend disciplinary tools and motivations and yield significant breakthroughs (Rosenberg, 1979). Then, too, anthropologists are hardly alone in grappling with market forces, as accounts of research scientists (JAMA, 16 Apr. '97; J. Clin. Epidem., May '97), writers in film (Dunne & Didion, 1997), and physicians in managed care (New York Times, 1 July '97) attest.

Some Working Distinctions and Examples

Before coming to terms, courtship in contract work often requires undoing misperceptions about what anthropologists (still associated more with tents than texts) actually do. ("Ethnography" is a term promiscuously used in evaluation research, for example, often as little more than a gloss for artful anecdote, local color and telling instantiation.) Again, seasoned contract workers treat the client as a key informant in a shifting field of social influence and interests that one must master to accomplish the task at hand.

That said, and borrowing from Shattuck (whose own scheme combines the unknowable, the awkwardly known, and the ought-not-to-be known), we may distinguish:

1. Boundaries on knowing, or hedged fields of inquiry, stem from the scope of work contracted for, questions to be asked, methods to be used, timing and format of reports, and provisions for correction. Virgin contractors may take professional offense at being asked to "research issues identified by someone else" (McKenna, 1997), but in many evaluation studies that is the norm. At stake is the distinction between a focused inquiry and one in which "the problem" takes shape in a developmental fashion, grounded in local specifics and attuned to unforeseen contingencies. (Suppose contextual variables prove more influential than program specifics?) This does not mean that any application of ethnographic methods must be open-ended and self-limiting; but boundaries properly

demarcating the tasks and venues of inquiry should be differentiated from imposed conditions that distort the conduct of knowing. It may be possible to build in exploratory pilot studies before scope of work is settled upon, or to set up vehicles for periodic review and mid-course correction. Predefined problems, competing interests and tight timetables often preclude such measures.

2. Even in one's area of expertise, when the locality is unfamiliar obstacles to knowing may be legion. Especially difficult to gauge is the extent to which the site itself has been compromised, is an unwilling (even hostile) participant in an evaluation, or is so cross-cut with unresolved tensions among "stakeholders" that reception as anything except an "unwelcome outsider" or "threat" (Everhardt, 1975; Levis-Pilz, 1997) is impossible. Changes in sponsor or client personnel can mean shifting expectations of products and methods. Time, which enables many a fieldworker to sort through bafflement and rectify error, is in short supply. So, at times, is access to essential material. Contract archeologists retained to evaluate an area whose bounds extend beyond the property controlled by the client are at the mercy of adjacent landowners; an informed decision to preserve or protect is thus contingent on the cooperation of disinterested agents.

3. "The Parsis will not like this book," Luhrmann says of her recent ethnography (1996), and many "will say that it is not true." Were this contract work, that could be a problem. Knowing is routinely scuttled when the reports produced under contract become the intellectual property of the client (and other vehicles of publication are impractical or proscribed), and are allowed to rot on the shelf. Or, substantive revisions may be demanded by the client or sponsoring agency when written reports give offense, jeopardize relations with certain stakeholders, conflict with local folk experts, or show parties whose future good will is needed in a bad light. In politically sensitive settings, anthropologists may be pressured to censor or distort evaluative findings, suppress publication, alter conclusions or sign off on collective reports about which they have grave (but unvoiceable) reservations (Duncan, 1995). Closer to hand, informal suppression of the work of graduate students may occur when rights of prior publication are retained by the senior investigator and never exercised.

Unintentionally retained to "tell people what they do not want to know," an ethnographer may find that killing (or firing) the messenger is still considered sporting in some circles. A rehabilitation agency informed that what its clients need are real jobs, not more services, may decide to suppress that knowledge or subvert its application.

Special circumstances pose further threats to preserving evidence, records or notes. Nothing exposes an ethnographer and her subjects to search and scrutiny quite the way that litigation does (McNabb, 1995). In anticipation of subpoena, fieldnotes may be stripped of "extraneous" detail and identifying features, shorn of "unsupported" assertions, pared down to those coded specifics relevant to the task at hand. In the process, potentially valuable data are prematurely jettisoned. Conversely, preparations for prosecutory proceedings, a lawyer-anthropologist reports from Eastern Europe, can "submerge the past irretrievably."

Archeological material of unassessed value is lost when contractors are obliged to turn over artifacts to the client; or, should the decision to develop be reversed, they may be left with the fruits of evaluative excavation without the resources to analyze or curate. Dissemination may be blocked when findings conflict with clients' stated goals, vested interests, or legal liability. Slide presentations may be edited for reasons having nothing to do with their scholarly merit or significance -- to eliminate depictions of the site that show the client at variance with OSHA regulations, for example.

4. Textbook references to "covert" means in ethnography (e.g., Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983) to the contrary, <u>tainted</u> methods of knowing are uncommon in published accounts of contract work. Things are less clear in practice. Ways of knowing may officially proscribed by codes of professional conduct, the application of which may be unclear or subverted in a given instance. Codes outlaw data obtained through undeclared research, deceptive means, unauthorized access, uncredited borrowings, etc. But "accidental" knowing is not covered; nor is it clear, how "obtain[ing] in advance the informed consent" of anyone "having interests which might be impacted by the research" (Draft AAA Code of Ethics, <u>AN</u> Nov. '96) could work practically. Deciding who counts as "subjects" in a community setting, taking steps to inform them beforehand when one's objective is unobtrusive observation, seems a convention often finessed.

Ethnographic methods are especially prized by clients bent on finding out "what's really going on," and suspecting that direct inquiry would be fruitless. This can be as seemingly benign as seeking to evaluate an addiction recovery technique closed to (that is, supposed to be unknowable by) anyone not meeting qualifying criteria. At stake are both the contingencies of access and investigator allegiance (how the ethnographic promise traditionally extended toward informants or indigenous collaborators is altered under contractual circumstances). Matters get decidedly trickier when litigation is on the horizon; "investigative evaluation" (Fetterman, 1992) employs gumshoe techniques that explicitly seek to trap a subject in self-incrimination.

5. For Shattuck, <u>awkward knowing</u> is double-bound, internally unstable or oscillating, by virtue of its standpoint; for him, the prototype is ethnographic knowledge. But it also takes in "delicate" knowledge, of the sort that requires utmost care (even artful disguise) in communicating, as well as the dilemmas of translating. It surfaces in contract work most often, it seems to me, when anthropologists are pressed to render a judgment, or voice an opinion for the record, when they are fully mindful that their evidence is insufficient to do so. Timing can make sharing knowledge awkward, as when interim findings are "fed back" to participants in an ongoing evaluation. (Chatters (Jan. '97 <u>AN</u>) found partial knowing to be good enough in the sponsoring group's mind to block further inquiry needed to confirm and develop it.) Evaluation clients are often eager to draw causal inference from ethnographic complexity (Herr, 1997), and to do with the imprimatur of the author.

6. Beyond the reach of professional codes, some knowing may be <u>forbidden</u>, things or ways in which we ought not to know or share. Potentially mischievous findings are the most common. I know of one instance (some time ago) of an ethnographer who successfully convinced a federal agency <u>not</u> to release his submitted report on household composition because of the ease with which its findings could be misused. Self-censorship may occur when data are incomplete but tantalizing -- as when interviews inadvertently reveal that incidents of a highly sensitive nature may be common in a given community. Absent good comparison data, sound interpretation is impossible. Ceding the ground of dangerous material to others, on the other hand, means handing over problem-framing and commentary rights as well (Wilson, 1987; Nightingale, 1994).

Against Forgetting

One image cropped up at several points in this inquiry -- that of contract anthropologists working "in limbo." Taken classically, this refers to the marginal, isolated, betwixt and between status of the unjustly stranded. Dante was clear about one thing, however: those "suspended" in limbo had neither forgotten their origins nor given up hope. Given the structure, collaborative nature and time pressures of contract work, disciplinary "slippage" is an occupational hazard. Learned forgetfulness, of the sort not uncommonly encouraged in the cramped confines of contract work, is an especially destructive kind of unknowing. For the profession to accede in this loss, for it to ignore the need for sustained talk about the difficulties and focused work in preparing our students to deal with them, would be an unkinder cut still.

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<u>Resouces in the public domain:</u>

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