Foreword to the 25th Anniversary Edition

Of *Writing Culture,* 2020

Reconnect to the 1980s. Ronald Reagan was president of the United States. Debt crisis wrecked and rippled across developing worlds. Glasnost was emerging but contested, often brutally. Globalization was not yet articulated. It was a time of containment, undercut by palpable discontent and a sense that established structures could not hold.

Despite or perhaps because of this, the humanities and human sciences pulsed with energy, open to new perspectives and to their own transformation, sobered by new understandings of the way power works, vitalized by new understanding of cultural, social, biological, and other forms of difference. New insight—about the ways language, power, gender, sexuality, and race work and entwine in history—riveted and connected once disparate scholarly worlds. Cultural anthropology was a critical node; ethnography was a critical point of reference. Projects to describe other peoples and cultures garnered increasing interest, yet also came to be recognized as far from straightforward, almost inevitably caught within imperial webs and fantasies of self that rendered others inferior.

Recognition of how culture is written—produced through play between what is considered inside and outside, familiar and foreign, meaning and representation, legible as a coherent but open system of marks, marked by asymmetries between observer and observed—was particularly important. This directed attention to ways political economic forces, scientific and technological developments, and social conflicts shape and shift cultural forms. It also directed attention to ways scholars themselves produce culture through the ways they approach, analyze, and write about it. "Culture" came to be understood as something continually under construction, something made in time and space, through processes of inscription.

The 1986 publication of *Writing Culture* was critical in articulating how culture is inscribed, pointing to many junctures in the process of

ethnography where modes of inscription have an effect: in translation between languages, in the formulation of fieldnotes, in the genre forms through which ethnographic interlocutors speak and write, in the ways ethnographic texts are written, in the ways ethnography is compared to and borrows from other literary forms. Provocative work in each of these areas has followed, further elaborating how culture is, indeed, written.

In recognizing culture as written, culture itself became something somewhat different: less locatable in space and time, less stable, more generative, grammatological. This worried some and animated others. Or both. The conceptual and methodological implications of *Writing Culture* are profound and are still being worked out today.

In 1986, *Writing Culture* was already read in diverse ways. Focus on forms of ethnographic writing animated reflexive consideration of how textualization can embody both colonial order and post-modern possibility. Focus on how people in diverse circumstances continually remake themselves and their collective identities through particular forms of speech and writing drew literary, feminist, and psychoanalytic theory further into ethnographic analysis. Focus on problematic and alternative forms of ethnographic authority activated worry that anthropologists wouldn't continue to do the sustained fieldwork that is cultural anthropology's signature. Focus on the inadequacies of universalism, essentialism, experience, and representation provoked concern that cultural analysts would have no place to stand at home or abroad. All these (and still other) foci sparked memorably sharp debate and a wealth of scholarly and creative work. And all remain challenges today, in dramatically different historical circumstances.

Today, in my reading, we are called to think again about how the work of cultural analysis is itself designed and staged, recognizing the way our methods write what it is possible to say and structure who we are able to engage with.

My reading is of course partial and located. I was a student of Michael Fischer, George Marcus, and Steve Tyler when *Writing Culture* was published; it was an incredibly exciting and transformative time for me. Since then, I have gone on to work in the interdisciplinary field of science and technology studies (STS), focusing more and more over the years on the ways science is inscribed, legitimated, and circulated, bringing a history of science dimension to my work that has also shaped my understanding of the history of anthropology, cultural analysis, and ethnography. My work with STS graduate students, many of whom bring considerable scientific and technical expertise to their work as cultural analysts, has continued to energize me, keeping me scrambling to find ways to leverage what they bring to our work, shaping my investments in collaboration evident here.

For the last four years, I've also coedited (with Mike Fortun, a proper historian of science) the journal *Cultural Anthropology,* which was edited at Rice during the years I was a student there. George Marcus was founding editor; from the outset, the journal was positioned at the edge of the field, where experiments (both theoretical and textual) could be run, where different disciplinary perspectives and modes of working could come together. The challenge of the journal, as I have understood it, is to provide a place to seed what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1986) called minor language, a language that works at the limits of majoritarian thought, refracting it, activating its hidden potentials. It is about working in a critical tradition, knowing that what keeps it critical is its continued movement. Questions about the enduring legacy of *Writing Culture* and other critical works of the 1980s posed in my writing here have thus been overt in my daily practice of late, orienting the way I read and edit the incredible array of submissions that *Cultural Anthropology* receives. My comments are those of a participant-observer, with all the vicissitudes therein that *Writing Culture* taught us to reflect on. My framing is that of a teacher, ever concerned with ways to connect my students to ways of reading that they can move with, in directions other than those already imaginable.[1]

Analyzing Inscriptions

Writing culture, I tell my students, can be the *object* of analysis, the focus of attention. Scholars can attend to the ways particular forms of inscription provoke, enable, shape, and constrain what is conceived and said, and what is brought into relation. Inscriptions are read not only for their content—for what they say—but also to understand their structure and what it generates, and to understand how the inscription operates in a wider symbolic, discursive, and political economic context. Inscriptions are read for what they do (which is always more than intended), for what they marginalize and displace and put in motion. Inscriptions are read to understand what counts as representation, rather than as representation itself, as illustration of the way people put things together and imagine the nested systems they (and their inscriptions) move within.

The challenge of this kind of analysis has only intensified with the increased machining of form, driven by developments in computational and communications capacity. Forms of articulation have always traveled,

1. Special thanks to Brandon Costelloe-Kuhn, Aalok Khandekar, Mike Fortun, Michael Fischer, George Marcus, and Jim Clifford for help with the writing here.

but now they travel with the speed of the Internet, the ease of PowerPoint, and the formatting flare of Photoshop. People speak by "flashing" (rather than calling) with their cell phones, twittering, and texting. They create personas on and in the modalities of Facebook and Second Life.[2] They download form after form that needs just to be filled in and returned.

The implications of form have also intensified because of the way audits and licenses work in a neoliberal world order. It is an age of accounting, and accounting happens on and through forms. It is also an age in which licenses license in unprecedented ways. Patents, copyrights, trademarks, passports: they literally permit some things and bar others. Piracy, refusal to abide by licenses—for software, music, games—garners remarkable police attention, and also escapes it.

What, then, does *Writing Culture* call us to ask and attend to in our studies to come?

James Clifford's introductory questions continue to be a good place to start: Who speaks? Who writes? When and where? With or to whom? Under what institutional and historical constraints? What "prefigured realities" (White 1973, 1978) structure and orient?

Are there latent forms, such as those that structure, legitimate, and limit scientific thought, as described by Steve Tyler? What modes of inference are in play? How does thought move? Is movement from percept to concept, from particularity to generality, habitual? Honored? Disdained?

From a different direction, Paul Rabinow—drawing on Ian Hacking and Michel Foucault—encourages attention to regimes of truth and to what counts as objectivity. What styles of reason operate? he asks; how are they textualized and authorized, and what is their historicity? Can we avoid universalizing or ontologizing particular historical constructs, particularly our own?

There's also an array of questions about tropological, rhetorical, and narrative forms. Clifford asks us to consider how allegories and metaphors operate across articulations, including our own. Michael Fischer asks us to consider what narrative forms give people a space to puzzle over and rework their identities, creating "enabling histories" that orient their futures.

We also need to query forms of inscription that aren't linguistic. How, for example, do built environments, whether at the scale of the city or the scale of the scientific lab, inscribe, operating as systems of marks? How do databases, computer models, and digital maps—carriers of information that dramatically shape everyday life today—inscribe?

2. I learned about flashing as a mode of communication in Nigeria from Toluwalogo Odumosu, who recently completed a dissertation (in STS at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute) titled *Interrogating mobiles: a story of Nigerian appropriation of the mobile phone.*

Critically, today, we also need to ask which forms are attractors. In the swirl of circulation, which forms stand out as significant for our interlocutors? Which inscriptions shape and carry meaning, and also provoke reflection on them by their producers and users? What are the forms people worry over and which do they ignore?

Ethnographers, for example, continue to worry over ethnographic form. As they should.

Ethnographers should also run more experiments with form, writing in forms known to constrain in order to understand—ethnographically—how discursive constraint really works. Writing within ethnological categories such as kinship, economy, and religion conveys much, but also limits what can be said. Like Lila Abu-Lughod (2008), we should continue to write within these categories, as experiments that teach what they permit and what they disallow. We also could write within the genre conventions of the novel, or the legal affidavit or the Japanese haibun[3] (as Eve Sedgwick did in *A Dialogue on Love,* following James Merrill's example in "Prose of Departure"), learning more about what allows and disallows articulation and legibility. Experimentation, here (as in the sciences) is as much about constraint as freedom.

Writing, then, is not only about representation or even evocation but a way to generate insight.

Performing Ethnography

Writing culture, I teach, also happens in the *performance* of analysis. Culture is produced in the ways it is textualized for circulation.

And textualization is tricky. As Vincent Crapanzano discusses, the classic task is paradoxical. The ethnographer is asked to represent, in familiar terms, what is foreign. He is asked to decode that which demonstrates that the world is coded. And he must be convincing, authoritative. Yet every trick he can use to construct his authority can undermine it. He must be there, at the scene of description, but in so embedding himself he loses the credentials of distance and objectivity, for example. Crapanzano explicates George Catlin's writing about the Mandan Indian's O-Kee-Pa ceremony in the mid-nineteenth century, Goethe's writing about the Roman carnival, and Clifford Geertz's seminal "Deep Play: Notes on a Balinese Cockfight," describing how the author and authority is figured differently in each but is, nonetheless, across the essays, a heroic figure, with special vision or interpretive virtuosity. In the end, this, too, tricks and undermines the texts. The author as hero figure is no longer viable, if it ever was, Crapanzano seems to say.

3. A haibun is a prose piece, interspersed with haiku.

George Marcus describes others tricks of textualization, noting how failure to carry out particular kinds of analysis (combining political economic and symbolic analysis, for example) is often not a failure of intent but of textualization. It is hard to hold complex analyses together, particularly if dealing with different kinds of data, examples, and arguments. The challenge of relating global forces to local detail is thus a textual as well as conceptual challenge. Flow and arrangement of material matters, and ethnographers need a sharp eye for examples that show how scales cross, with ricochet effects, transforming systems at every level. Marcus's interest is in descriptive adequacy, both empirical and theoretical, but not as an end in itself. He continues to call for ethnographic work that refreshes—reboots, really—established social-theoretical insight. The call is not for ethnography that overtly and heroically theorizes, but for writing that performs its argument, confirming, extending, or contesting extant theory in a manner that calls for rejoinder.

What, then, to do in our efforts to come? How do we get our texts to help carry our arguments, operating not only as delivery devices but as messages in themselves, compelling statements in their form?

First, as *Writing Culture* so powerfully teaches us, we must read texts as texts, looking at how they are put together, start, flow, and finish, noticing how footnotes, images, and text boxes are put to work, imagining—even laying out—covers for our books before the research is even done. I ask my students to do this.

Texts need to be imagined as we move through the field, directing our attention to the kinds of material we will need to *perform* an analysis. This means that we also must imagine narration and argument as we go, even while remaining open to the field's beckoning, answering the field's call, recognizing that its intricacies will take us where theory never could. The prospect of writing can orient without determining our inquiries.

It is not only about writing beautifully, or rendering people and events poignantly. And poetics don't license texts without order. The challenge is to put things together inventively, to order them in a way that reorders readers' experience. Readers, here, are engaged as interlocutors—as people to engage—not unlike the interlocutors we engage as research subjects.

This is not to say that interpretive virtuosity is itself outmoded. The skill of the cultural analyst is as important as ever; the challenge is in situating and textualizing her readings so that they can be questioned, supplemented, advanced.

Mocking the conventions of interpretive anthropology, Rabinow

writes that "the details in these narratives are precise, the images evocative, the neutrality exemplary, and the mode *retro*." The problems are different today, and the taunt needs to be rewritten, pointing to ways the so-called literary turn in cultural analysis has, in some instances, driven passionate investment in presence, even as critiques of the assumptions of presence and logocentrism have provided increasing analytic purchase. Today's taunt, on Rabinow's model, could read: "The scenes of these narratives are emotionally charged, often involving the author himself. The author's passion, 'theory,' reflexivity, and literariness impress, but we still must submit to his advances to go anywhere. The text remains directive, encapsulating its worlds like the best of melodrama." Self-reference, as Rabinow notes, can be just another device for establishing authority.

Presence no longer guarantees cultural analysis, and fetish for it can limit imagining of research forms appropriate to context and concern. Sometimes, engagements with census and other demographic data, with transcripts of congressional hearings, or with novels about or read by our interlocutors are as generative as "being there." It's about bringing different kinds of systems into view, with all kinds of found material. But it isn't about comprehensiveness, either.

The best ethnographies, Clifford reminds us, are systems and economies of truth, and are structured accordingly. They convey, convince, and enroll because they select and exclude—drawing out, literally, through content and form, particular relationships. An ethnographer's sense of partiality, Clifford insists, can become a representational tack.

There are exemplars and theories we can use to think of this challenge. Steve Tyler points us to the Bible, as ethnography, and particularly to the Synoptic Gospels. Mary Louse Pratt points us to adjacent and antecedent forms, particularly travel writing and other genres that play between subjective and objective posturing, narration, description, and argument. Rabinow and Clifford point us to Dickens, in contrast to Flaubert. Marcus recommends (and closely reads here) Paul Willis's *Learning to Labor.* Michael Fischer focuses on ethnic autobiographies by figures like Maxine Hong Kingston and Charles Mingus, drawing out particular textual strategies that allow ethnicity to be accounted for, worked through, and projected into the future.

Steve Tyler's essay in *Writing Culture* describes the goal as producing texts that not only represent but also have a therapeutic effect. It is hard, in the best sense, to imagine what he has in mind. His essay is clearly that of a virtuoso; he works his ideas and words with incredible skill. But much is left to the reader nonetheless.

There is no formula. The right textual structure emerges from the

material it structures. It draws readers into an intellectual labyrinth, laying out where they go without determining it, opening pathways for movement in different directions. As Talal Asad reminds us, these structures need not be literally written. A dramatic performance, dance or music might be the best way to translate alien forms into something with which imagined audiences can connect.

If we've thought thus far, for the most part, of our readers alone with our books, let us now imagine our readers in conversation provoked by our books and other performances, imagining the kinds of collectivities and collaborations that can be incited. It is not as though we didn't know before that readers read within social webs. But I don't think we've really imagined our work as helping produce those webs, mobilizing collective deliberation, generating social and cultural forms for reflecting on and advancing what we call culture.[4]

Designing Research

A post-modern ethnography is a cooperatively evolved text consisting of fragments of discourse intended to evoke in the minds of both reader and writer an emergent fantasy of a possible world of commonsense reality, and thus to provoke an aesthetic integration that will have a therapeutic effect. It is, in a word, poetry—not in its textual form, but in its return to the original context and function of poetry, which, by means of its performative break with everyday speech, evoked memories of the ethos of the community and thereby provoked hears to act ethically (cf. Jaeger 1945:3–76).

STEPHEN A. TYLER, "A Post-Modern Ethnography"

Most nascent, most ahead of us, I say, is effort to work out how *Writing Culture* implicates the way cultural analysis itself is produced and parameterized.[5] There was little explicit talk about method in *Writing Culture* or in the wider discursive sphere in which the book emerged and first moved. In *Writing Culture* itself, for example, there is no index

4. have worked for many years in and on environmental movements, and have observed quite remarkable approaches to community organizing. But it has been my work on scientific communities that has really fueled new interest in how collectivities emerge, are sustained, and develop the capacity to critically reflect on and creatively advance their own work. My interest in new forms of collaboration among cultural analysts, highlighted here, partly comes from this. We need to figure out, it seems to me, what kinds of collectivity will take cultural analysis into its next phase at its best. George Marcus has pointed to this as well, often noting in recent years that there is too little collective engagement with the "findings" of ethnography or real deliberation over how findings are produced.

5. Parameterization is the process of defining the aspects of a (computer) model that are salient to the questions being asked of that model. I borrow the vocabulary from the environmental modelers with whom I work ethnographically.

entry for "methods." Today, *Writing Culture* can be read as a call to method, to the invention of new research forms.[6]

In readings of culture as written, culture is not exterior to its inscription but emergent from play with it. This means that cultural analysts participate in the production of culture through their inquiries. It also means that culture can never be pinned down, but is always becoming, catalyzing, amassing new properties.

This continual morphing of culture has intensified. With electronically intensified circulation of both form and content, globally, locally, and between, culture comes together in noisy spaces, spaces buzzing with stressors. Culture thus morphs faster than in the past and constantly acquires new sides and surfaces.

Often this pushes people into an almost continual figuring-out mode, aware that their worlds have "outrun the pedagogies in which they were trained" (Fischer 2003: 9). This readies them for rich ethnographic encounters. People caught within and trying to figure out change often need and appreciate encounters where they can reach for articulations, and are presented with questions that keep their articulations moving. Culture is ahead of them and needs a language.

Intensified cultural production has also readied the readers of cultural analysis. An era of late capitalism, post-socialism, failed democracy, and unending war is not an era in which people are prone to believe what they see and trust what they hear. Many (certainly not all) recognize that the news can be a joke and that parody can be a means to insight. Authority comes not from being unquestionable but by acknowledging partiality.

It is no longer news that the West cannot adequately represent the rest of the world. Empire certainly operates, and makes partiality of perspective all too clear to many. The language and cultural hierarchies drawn out by Talal Asad in writing culture are much more on the surface. Monologue in the terms of the colonizer just won't cut it.

But neither will the cacophony of the talk show, all apparently licensed to speak, though with a star master of ceremonies if not a pundit at center stage. More voices are now heard—louder, often shrill, and painfully sure of themselves. The call to collaborative production is different.

Methods for accessing culture thus need to be updated. Digital terms are appropriate here. Among digital progressives, "access" is now un-

6. There were complicated and important reasons for the distance from explicit discussion and teaching of methods in the 1980s. For many in the world of *Writing Culture*, "methods" signaled demands for formulaic techniques of analysis. For some it also signaled confidence in the capacities and transparency of representation. Note, by contrast, that "Methods and methodological obligations" is one of the longer index entries in Michael Fischer's 2009 *Anthropological Futures*.

derstood as much more than mere connection to a computer or broadband. Access is the capacity not only to connect but to *work with* the content that connection provides access to, transforming and adding to that content so that it has relevance. This requires technical infrastructure and modes of practice that enable collaboration—between researchers and their research subjects, among researchers themselves, between researchers and readers. Collaboration—etymologically, the labor of working together—is far from straightforward.

Writing Culture opened pathways in attention given to fieldwork practice and to modes of translation and writing relied on in the field. In attending to fieldnotes as a place where culture is inscribed and produced, questions were raised about the ways the cultural analyst herself produces, and ignores or disavows, possibilities for culture.

Pathways were also opened by attention given to the way ethnographic authority was then constructed. Many of the essays center on this. In the sardonic start of his essay, for example, Crapanzano describes the ideal ethnographer as like Hermes, a translator of messages in foreign code. Zeus understood that when Hermes promised to tell no lies, he did not promise to tell the whole truth. Ethnographers, Crapanzano says, have yet to learn this critical difference. Renato Resaldo casts the ethnographer even more harshly, drawing out parallels with the role and tactics of the inquisitor.

Steve Tyler begins to articulate alternatives, noting that the ideology of observer-observed must be displaced for ethnographic encounters to be cooperate and collaborative, dialogic, a *producer* of stories. Polyphony is the goal for Tyler, allowance for a multiplicity of sides and voices, but the specific form is emergent from and appropriate to the encounter. Again, textualization is cast as an interpretive, productive move rather than as a way to capture something fully formed before.

Tyler insists that "polyphony is a means of perspectival relativity and is not just an evasion of authorial responsibility or a guilty excess of democracy." It is about politics, though. The language inequalities and cultural hierarchies Asad describes remain an issue. Difference is never simply brought together, without operations of power, without an organizing system. Even the inquisitor, as Resaldo points out, can organize difference. But not in a way that really gets at it, leverages it, prompts its movement into discursively risky terrain.[7]

Part of the ongoing challenge, then, is the position of the analyst. She will continue to document—knowing the richness of the classic case

7. Tyler also points out that many communities have long produced texts collaboratively: myths and folktales are examples. Clifford refers to James Walker's four-volume work on the Lakota as an early "collaborative work of documentation" deserving note.

study—but also solicits, not what her interlocutors already know but what they want to say and are becoming.[8] She will seek to understand their systems, to find where they are labile and where they need articulation. Her work, as Marcus (2006) has described it, will be "in the temporality of emergence into near and unknown futures." (2007, p1131). Not just any research subject, topical or human, will do. Selection of a topical domain that has moving grounds is a critical part of research design; so is the selection of research subjects. As Mary Louse Pratt notes in her engagement with *Nisa,* Marjorie Shostack figured out and learned to leverage the fact that "not all natives are equivalent or equal." The need for this kind of figuring out has only intensified with shifts in understanding what ethnography can become. Our challenge is not in the making of a representative sample but in locating and building rapport with "research subjects" ready for new articulations.[9]

Often the analyst needs help. If culture has an increasing number of sides and combinatory possibilities, researchers need to work together to get at it. This, too, implicates the comportment of the cultural analyst, and the tenure and other professional processes through which she is allowed to advance. Investment in the single-authored monograph isn't displaced, but it becomes open to question. Investments in open-access models of publishing become a high priority.

"Open-access" computing infrastructure, publishing, and practice are important to think about carefully here for a number of reasons. Available infrastructure literally structures what can happen in practice. Collaboration among people in different places, of different means, depends on shared infrastructure that isn't cost prohibitive. Furthermore, distributed collaboration can produce amazingly robust, well-vetted re-

8. To solicit, I have learned (from Mike Fortun), is etymologically and practically related to care and to deconstruction. Structure, Derrida teaches, "is perceived through the incidence of menace, at the moment when imminent danger concentrates our vision on the keystone of an institution, the stone which encapsulates both the possibility and the fragility of its existence. Structure then can be methodically threatened in order to be comprehended more clearly and to reveal not only its supports but also that secret place in which it is neither construction nor ruin but lability. This operation is called (from the Latin) soliciting. In other words, shaking in a way related to the whole (from *sollus,* in archaic Latin 'the whole,' and from *citare,* 'to put in motion')" (Derrida 1978). Gayatri Spivak adds that "once a system has been 'shaken' . . . one finds an excess which cannot be construed within the rules of logic, for the excess can only be construed as *neither* this *nor* that—or both at the same time" (Spivak 1976, xvi). Careful soliciting can thus become an ethnographic technique, aimed at helping people articulate what could not be said before, oriented toward the future.

9. Pratt also points out that people's readiness to talk—like Nisa's—is conditioned by imperialism and other power structures, by desire for reward, and by prior engagement with interviewers. To really engage, then, the cultural analyst needs a finely tuned sense of the histories, socialities, and investments in play. Research does not begin at the point of contact.

sults. Think Linux. Open access thus provides the means by which more collaborative cultural analysis could emerge and a compelling example of how collective scrutiny of a community's "results" can take shape.

Open access also points to global-systems-level concerns. Open-access infrastructure and practice counters a still emergent but increasingly concrete mode of production that seeks to fence knowledge products as property (Boyle 2003). As a result of the latter, corporations have new interests in scholarly products and in keeping them—and the infrastructure on which scholarly products develop—proprietary. Open-source software and open-access licensing allow a different kind of organization and orientation. They are not cheap—indeed, they are labor and skill intensive—but investments are oriented toward circulation rather than sales, toward creative commons rather than systems that pen things in and pin them down.[10]

In figuring out the implications of *Writing Culture,* we thus have to figure out how we will work—technically, socially, aesthetically, conceptually—understanding that we make culture in so doing. If culture is inscribed, it is also mediated and technological; the poetics and politics of culture and ethnography are caught up in infrastructure. We need to build forms of infrastructure that allow us to figure out our differences, rerouting both monologue and cacophony, letting something no one anticipated in advance emerge from the encounter, making space for rejoinders. Inventing new methods, infrastructure, and forms of research is thus a critical challenge. Ethnography itself is on the line.

The Call of *Writing Culture*

A User's Manual

> WARNING: [Writing Culture] *is going to resist you. Dealing with a logic and topos of the switchboard, it engages the destabilization of the addressee. Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to learn how to read with your ears. In addition to listening for the telephone, you are being asked to tune your ears to noise frequencies, to anticoding, to the inflated reserves of random indeterminateness—in a word, you are expected to stay open to the static and interference that will occupy these lines.*
>
> AVITAL RONELL, *The Telephone Book*

The feminist literary scholar Avital Ronell has encouraged—expected, nagged—critical scholars to be on call, open to what is on the line, even if hard to hear or cut by static, aware that the electric flow

10. Editing a journal amid the massive restructuring of scholarly publishing over the last decade has taught me to make this argument and insist on its significance.

continues even when you hang up. She asks that we be ready for interruption, knowing to call back when the call is lost. Knowing, also, when to hang up.[11] Ronell's *Telephone Book* begins with "A User's Manual" that directs us this way. It also can direct readings of *Writing Culture.*[12]

Writing Culture, like *The Telephone Book,* aims to constitute subjects that won't turn off the future. It insists that we continually ask what's on the line and what we need to do in response. The call is for scholarship attuned to its historical moment, which means—as it did in the mid-1980s—attuned to the need for experimentalism, for trying new approaches, forever reaching for something that really works inventively. Inventions—like the telephone—that allow new connections need to be figured out rather than disdained or disavowed. Cultural analysts are called not only to listen to electric speech but to invent the next generation of it.

Writing Culture, like *The Telephone Book,* also aims to reconfigure authority and the authorial position; Ronell casts herself as "operator" rather than as author of her text. This is not a deferential move. Readers beware! When an author becomes an operator, she doesn't just describe and explicate on your behalf but plugs you in, connects and plays you, redirecting your calls as she continually reads how the systems you are in—both local and long distance—are working. In *Writing Culture,* ethnographers become operators.

Ronell, in my reading, asks that we let *Writing Culture* get to us, that we let the call through, trying hard to interpret its message in ways that make sense on our end of the line, hearing its indeterminacies as provocations that open channels for invention.

The hardest part of the call is about time, about how to write culture attuned to its historicity and future. Changing structures of production must be thought through and engaged.[13] As events in iran in

11. *The Telephone Book* includes a sustained critique of Heidegger for not hanging up on Hitler, national socialism, and yearning for meaning prior to technology (See also Derrida 1989). Technology here is that which structures life and sets up life chances. It is the switchboard that everything goes through. So life is, always, already technological, even though driven by the need to think and make difficult decisions about particular technologies. Doctors, patients and families today, for example, are easily caught by what Mary Jo Good calls a "biotechnical embrace," unable but called upon to make difficult judgments about when medical interventions intended to heal become torture (2007). Difficult decisions of a different kind are called for in the making of digital technologies and the Internet. For perspective on how the architecture of the Internet will both shape life possibilities and write culture, see Lawrence Lessig's *Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace* and *Code: Version 2.0.*, the latter written on Lessig's Wiki that allowed readers to edit the text (2006, 2000).

12. Ronell's text itself is telephonic; its flows, fonts, interruptions (with long passages from the writing of other theorists) and "therapeutic effect" (Tyler) mime an electric call.

13. Writing culture today thus calls upon us to think deeply about how digital technologues and the Internet create new conditions of production and possibility. Texts like *Blown to Bits: Your Life, Liberty, and Happiness after the Digital Explosion* (Abelson, Ledeen, and Lewis, 2008) deserve our attention. See also Yochai Benkler's *The Wealth of Networks* (2006).

summer 2008 demonstrated, Twitter may indeed be the way to revolution.[14] Second Life may provide critical space for working out new identities (boellstorff 2008). Video, projection capabilities, and the Internet may be the way village India deliberates natural resource management and deals with global warming.[15]

It *is* all about technology, if technology is understood as the platform on which thought and life unfold. Technology is not to be obeyed or blindly invested in, but listened to, engaged and sometimes redesigned. Our ears must be tuned to emergent modes of inscription. The call needs to be picked up.

Our writing must also be technological in its mechanics. As Clifford says in his introduction to *Writing Culture,* and many other contributors echo, ethnography is a skillful fashioning of useful artifacts, which should allow people to think, say, and do what was not possible previously. Cultural analysis and ethnography are matters of design and production, which work by changing what is said and sayable, who speaks and who relates, what gets left alone and what gets shaken up. *Writing Culture* doesn't provide a blueprint. Instead, it issues a call.

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14. While Twitter was not (as often jokingly hyped at the time) the primary technology of revolution, together with video cell phones, Facebook, and other social networking technologies, it helped coordinate mass demonstrations and kept the state from preventing dissemination of footage both inside and outside the country. These technologies are double-edged—open to both state surveillance and dissemination—but in this case impressively demonstrated a population's willingness to take such risks and call into question the legitimacy of the government.

15. I think here of the work of the video artist Surajit Sarkar in the Catapult Arts Caravan Project. Sarkar takes teams of videographers (some from the metropole, some from the village) into village settings and over a few weeks collects a cache of local commentary on tape. This commentary is then projected back to villagers on a wall of their marketplace, designed to provoke consideration of different future scenarios for natural resource management.

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