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Reply To Dennis Tedlock

ARNOLD KRUPAT

The editor of the *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* has kindly given me the opportunity to reply to Dennis Tedlock's response to my essay-review of his book, *The Spoken Word and the Work of Interpretation*. I have been asked only that my "counter-comment should not be longer than his paper, [that I] . . . should avoid any personal comments, and should try to remain as close as possible to the points of contention that are discussed in his paper."¹

I can surely be briefer than Tedlock, because there are very few real points of contention between his positions and my own; it is only his *representation* of what I wrote in my "Mythography and Dialogue . . ." that produces the appearance of contention. Personal comment is another matter. My review article treats Tedlock's work with consistent praise, in a tone that is respectful throughout; there is nothing of the "innuendo and irony" of which I am accused.² Tedlock responds to my work, however, by impugning not merely my scholarship but my motives, assuming that I am consistently engaged in "moves" familiar or recognizable, in a variety of "games" all of which are to be taken as aspects of "academic politics" (p. 70, 72, and *passim*). It is virtually impossible to defend oneself against a charge as vague and insidious as playing "academic politics," especially since Tedlock never does say what he actually means by the phrase. He and I are not members of the same department, nor even in the same discipline (he is an anthropologist, I am a professor of literature); we are not affiliated with the same institutions. I have no doubt he has something specific in mind, but what? I continue to believe that what I wrote can be judged entirely on its own

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terms, and that no speculation about motives is necessary to explain it. If one nonetheless feels compelled to look for outside explanations, it seems to me that the notion of a desire to play "academic politics" is among the more fantastic. It is much more reasonable to conclude that Tedlock has, here, quite simply projected his own concerns as mine.

*

"Mythography and Dialogue . . ." offered the highest praise for Tedlock's work, and proceeded to take it seriously by discussing the issues it raised which were of most interest to me, in the terms and categories that were most congenial to me, a procedure hardly discreditable for a reviewer and commentator.³ Thus I made use of one of James Clifford's essays, taking from it 1) comments on the difficulties that inhere in all writing, by a single author, of anything purporting to be a dialogue, 2) a definition of what Clifford called the "fable of rapport," and, 3) a distinction between interpretive and experiential emphases in anthropological work. It might be thought that my essay thereby opened the dialogue between Tedlock and me to another voice—James Clifford's. Tedlock does not see it that way and accuses me of causing his words to "disappear beneath the label borrowed from Clifford" (p. 70). Tedlock thinks his Chapter 13 might better be called a "comedy of errors" than a "fable of rapport." But one need not choose between these terms; "comedy of errors" seems a possible type of the broader class, "fables of rapport." (Then comes all the fussing about my phrase, "late-stage variant," awkward at worst, with the dripping sarcasm that "at least Krupat did not find my essay 'primitive,' whatever 'stage' it may belong to, it is 'late'" (p. 71). My phrase pointed to no more than that most of the writers Clifford referred to wrote earlier than Tedlock did.)

Tedlock's characterization of my discussion of the subject of interpretation and experience falsifies not only the spirit but the letter of it as well. I went out of my way to indicate that these terms, as I employed them, were not oppositional terms but matters of emphasis. There is a sort of Heisenbergian principle in the humanities and social sciences that precludes us from, at the same time, attending equally to the experiential dimension of culture and to its interpretation—but here I should have been bolder, perhaps, and said its *explanation*; that might have helped to set

me apart from the Geertzian interpretive mode that both Tedlock and I would reject. Nowhere did I state or imply that Native people were to remain content with their status as producers of culture, reserving the interpretation of culture to anthropologists alone. I have learned, perhaps best from Dennis Tedlock, that Indians most certainly do comment critically on their narrative performances and do so even in those performances. I suspect, however, that the critical and interpretive terms of Native storytellers and of anthropologists (even Native anthropologists) usually differ. To pursue this subject would return us to the old debates between emic and etic perspectives, or embroil us, in current terms, in a discussion of the desirability of a post-modern anthropology as opposed to the desirability—indeed, the possibility—of a “scientific” anthropology. On this matter, it is possible that Tedlock and I do have a substantive disagreement. Before specifying what that might be, I suppose I must respond to Tedlock’s charge that I use Clifford as part of a “move” in what he calls “the *politics* of who-should-have-cited-whom,” otherwise known as “the citation *game*” (p. 71, my emphases).

I placed in two separate notes my notice of the fact that Tedlock’s published work did not make reference to Clifford’s work or to the work of the Russian theorist, Mikhail Bakhtin. So there can be no mistake, I will quote exactly what I said. Note 5 first indicates my sense that the terms interpretation and experience “are in dialectical relation” to each other, “that each contains elements of the other; [so that] they are not, therefore, in some putative relation of pure or ‘binary’ opposition.” (Bear this in mind when reading Tedlock’s version of my reservation of interpretation to the academic scientist.) The note concludes, “Tedlock and Clifford are concerned with many of the same issues although neither mentions the other’s work.”⁴ Note 8 concludes, “Clifford is attentive to Bakhtin; Tedlock does not mention his work.”⁵ That is the extent of any innuendo, irony, or implied criticism. *Now* all the world may know that Tedlock did not mention Clifford or Bakhtin by design, for he knew them well: but what does it matter? My account nowhere suggested that Tedlock’s work was somehow deficient because of the absence of Bakhtin and Clifford.

I made a mistake in the date I gave for Clifford’s article. I don’t know how that happened. It is regrettable; I apologize; and I hope readers of my work will acknowledge that such error is not

typical of my scholarship. But it approaches the absurd to explain that error as part of an attempt to engage in "the politics of who-should-have-cited-whom," or to play some kind of "citation game" (p. 71, the latter phrase repeated twice). It would take a very great fool indeed to try to make some petty point by way of catching Dennis Tedlock in a missed reference, so obviously wide is the range of his reading, and so up-to-date. For Tedlock to suggest even remotely that my error was caused by a desire "to put [him] in a bad position" (p. 71), and then to conclude smugly that now "the shoe is on the other foot" (p. 71), is just embarrassing from a scholar of his stature.

(The question of a post-modern anthropology or anthropology as a science, to return briefly to this point, might center on Tedlock's comments on his pages 70 and 72. On p. 69 he seems to wish to associate dialogical anthropology with the post-modern movement in the social sciences, something I know mostly from Stephen Tyler's recent and extreme excursus in the Lyotardian mode, called "Post-Modern Ethnography: From document of the Occult to Occult Document."⁶ (I haven't yet read the Marcus and Fischer book to which Tedlock makes reference.) If Tedlock means to ally dialogical anthropology with anything like what Tyler proposes, I would want to argue a contrary position. But his remarks on pp. 71-72 offer nothing I can see as opposing my own tentative "scientist" position; indeed, they seem as much an expansion as a refutation of what I wrote.)

I come finally to the issue which exercises Tedlock most. The substance, here, involves our disagreement concerning what might be called relevant context. Tedlock and I agree, I think, that the context in which storytelling and commenting on stories takes place is important. We do not seem to agree on what the concept of context properly ought to include, on where one may legitimately *stop* in one's specification of relevant context. I did not think this issue was central in my essay and so—like my reference to the fact that Tedlock didn't mention Clifford and Bakhtin—relegated mention of it to a note (albeit a lengthy one) which I peppered with disclaimers and qualifications. I suspected that there was considerable political violence going on in Guatemala during the time that Tedlock was there, and I conjectured that this might have come to the notice of the storytellers with whom he worked and perhaps even influenced the stories they told. *That* is what one might want to know; and the

purposes—not merely purpose (p. 74)—for which one might want to know range from an interest in how traditional storytellers incorporate contemporary materials into traditional stories (e.g., Donald Bahr has heard, as I understand it, *traditional airplane* songs from Papago singers; David Guss has heard *traditional* stories about *tape recorders* from Yekuana storytellers, etc.) to an interest in how anthropologists, children “of colonialism and the proof of its death throes,” to take Tedlock’s epigraph from Todorov, respond in such difficult situations.

I asked an undergraduate student, Claude Lehman, to see what he could find out for me about events in Guatemala during the years Tedlock was there. He began, reasonably enough as I thought, with the *New York Times*. Neither of us had time to go much further, and my awareness of the rough and rudimentary nature of our researches seemed to require the disclaimers Tedlock finds so objectionable (p. 73 and 74). Tedlock’s comments demonstrate 1) that media sources, even the august *Times*, may be inaccurate and inadequate, and 2) that he knows more about Guatemala than I do. Neither point is in contention. I can only say that I wish he had given some of the information he provides *here* in his book. Nor does he yet address the issue of the anthropologist’s relation to political events occurring as he studies culture, even events three days away “From an Indian point of view” (p. 75). To dismiss my reference to context “as nothing more than an ironic [!] reference to the fact that [Tedlock] does not mention recent political violence” (p. 74) is an inadequate response to the issue I raised. Tedlock finds it convenient to claim that “It is hard to escape the conclusion” that I raise this question “not for scholarly purposes but for the purposes of academic politics” (p. 74). Hard for whom, one might wonder. What, if the issue were raised not for scholarly, nor for academically political but for moral purposes or a politics wider than the groves of academe? Tedlock continues to avoid this dimension of his work entirely; that is his prerogative, but he will have to take responsibility for that avoidance without taking refuge in bluster.

There are, to be sure, other matters I might take up. One of these is Tedlock’s distortion of my characterization of my own discourse as academic, as a declaration of allegiance to the “ruling discourse of academia” (p. 72). There are many academic discourses—his, mine, Clifford’s, and so on; which of these *rules*

is not entirely clear. Most distressing is Tedlock's refusal to allow the obvious: that I offered this characterization in a conclusion to the review article which precisely sought to appropriate his authority to *encourage* dialogue—to use his work in the interest of breaking down the radical separation between interpretation and experience, Indians and whites, east and west, and so on. Incredibly, Tedlock represents me as doing exactly the opposite.

Much as I regret his response, I continue to believe what I wrote near the beginning of my review: that Tedlock is "one of the handful of indispensable commentators on Native American literatures,"⁷ and that his "call to dialogue," as I concluded my review, "may be particularly important to consider at the present moment."⁸ I can only hope that our dialogue in the future may be more fruitful.

NOTES

1. Letter to me dated 2/25/87 from Duane Champagne.
2. Dennis Tedlock, "Scholarship, Politics, and Dialogical Anthropology," 74. All further page references to this article will be given in the text.
3. See Arnold Krupat, "Mythography and Dialogue in the Study of Native American Literature," a review article on Dennis Tedlock's *The Spoken Word and the Work of Interpretation* (Philadelphia, 1983); *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 8:4 (1984 [1986]) 47-55.
4. *Ibid*, 55.
5. *Ibid*, 55.
6. In *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley, 1986).
7. Krupat, "Mythography and Dialogue . . .," 47.
8. *Ibid*, 54.