

Introduction: Imagining the Field

Melbourne, November 1992—A Daydream

I am sitting in a small, open boat, perhaps a speedboat or motorized canoe. A blue calm surrounds me—blue sky and sea, made brilliant by a bright sun. Even so, I feel nervous and excited as I look out across the ocean, anxiously scanning the horizon for a glimpse of land, “the field,” Nuakata—my named, but as yet unseen, destination. Fortunately I am not alone on the boat. Roger, my husband, is with me, together with two Papua New Guinean men who steer the small craft and nurture its tiny outboard motor. They are not my only sources of comfort and security. Propped against a large metal trunk, I take consolation from the knowledge that it contains my research proposal, books, and last-minute instructions on how to prepare genealogies.

The scene dissolves. A white sand beach appears. Standing on the shoreline, I extend my hand in all directions to the people who have gathered there to meet us. Moving to greet them I desperately try to radiate warmth, respect, and interest, willing people to like me. Rummaging in my bags and pockets I pull out the gifts Roger and I have brought. I am anxious, hoping the gifts are appropriate, wondering if we have brought enough. Looking around I realize that there are no women on the beach. Where are they? Why don’t they come? What if they won’t speak to me?

Nuakata, April 1993—A Lived Experience

Night has fallen. The Coleman lamp is lit, and our house is filled with laughter. We are gathered around a large metal trunk, playing cards.

Heavy with books, paper, and tapes, the trunk is almost impossible to lift. Even so, it makes a perfect card table for five or six players. On this particular night we are playing Oh Hell—Wycliffe, Washington, Waligeha, Roger, and myself. Wycliffe is winning, declaring himself the Oh Hell champion. The rest of us protest, promising his success will be short-lived. Later, as I place five cups of coffee on the trunk, it occurs to me that coffee and card evenings were not a feature of my prefield day-dreams about doing ethnography on Nuakata!



In these reflections—one a memory of something experienced, the other a memory of something experienced only as a dream—the trunk represents a link between my imaginary field and my lived experience of Nuakata. Laden with make-believe books and preparatory notes, the fictional trunk provided a point of reference and stability for my imaginary journey to the field. Purchased at Alotau on mainland Papua New Guinea, the real trunk was initially the focus of considerable local attention partly because of its size and weight and the problems this caused in transferring it between boat, shore, and house. The trunk also attracted attention because it was locked and known to be expensive. Later, people were intrigued by its contents, for it concealed a largely inaccessible world of books—mainly novels and anthropological texts. It was home to my fieldwork equipment: a camera, tape recorder, pens and paper; the trunk also held my research plan, which detailed how I intended to relate with local people! In this sense, the trunk and its contents were objects entangled in webs of significance, solid representations of the differences—real and imagined—between Roger and me and the people of Nuakata.

However, as time passed and our relationships strengthened, interest in the trunk and its contents waned. Eventually it became a mere prop around and upon which some of the mundane but nonetheless important and ritualized aspects of our daily life unfolded. Though the trunk became a functional object, incidental to our relationships and daily living on Nuakata, my memory of the ideas raised by the books inside it continued to influence the questions I posed to people, my response to their replies, and the self-conscious reflections on Nuakatan lived experience rendered into field notes.

Placed alongside one another, these written snapshot memories of the dream and reality of my experience on Nuakata beg the question, In

what ways did the field of my imagination influence the field I participated in, observed, and now represent? More generally, what constitutes fieldwork? Where and when does it begin and end? Is it gendered like the field, as some insist?¹ Indeed, what is the ethnographic field? Is it a permanent, bounded place, real and independent of the fieldworker's pre-conceptions? Or is it space circumscribed by the ethnographer's imagination and beliefs? Should it be thought of as a place or places? Or is it a multidimensional field of interaction and power between people, places, times, and things, squeezed into texts?² Could it exist on "two fronts: as a field of knowledge (as a 'discipline') and a field of action, a force field, or a site of struggle," as Scheper-Hughes (1992, 25; 1995, 419–20) suggests? Perhaps most important, how are these questions relevant to both the real and the written lives of people living and dying on Nuakata?

Questions such as these—along with the more fundamental one, Why do ethnographic fieldwork?—invite reflection on the significance of autobiography in fieldwork and writing ethnography.³ More broadly, they invite critical reflection on the process, politics, and ethics of anthropological knowledge creation and expression in ethnographic texts. From a prior position of distance and/or inexperience, the fieldworker imagines or anticipates her invisible field of investigation, its intellectual terrain and its boundaries. She also imagines her future location, identity, and relationships in the field. These preconceptions and their associated anxieties are inevitably confronted in the field, often with far-reaching consequences for the research. Yet, this confrontation between the preconceived field and the lived experience of the field is invariably siphoned off from, or neatly partitioned in, ethnographic texts. It is rendered peripheral, if not irrelevant, to ethnographic method and anthropological knowledge creation (cf. Rosaldo 1980). Not only can these textual elisions give the false impression that the fieldworker arrives in the field bearing minimal baggage—intellectual or otherwise—but, perhaps more insidiously, they imply that whatever she brings and however she bears it, it is of little or no consequence to the participant observation and writing that ensues. In other words, the ethnographer forgets or chooses to ignore the epistemological significance of means to ends, gestation to birth, producers, and the processes of production⁴ to finished products—written texts. This reinforces the related but dubious notion that fieldwork begins and ends with the arrival in and departure from a field, a specific peopled place. It is yet another means of denying the subjective and temporal dimension to ethnography. Moreover, it reinforces the view that the ethnographer

alone orchestrates and performs fieldwork and fieldwork relations. In contrast, I argue that the ethnographic field, fieldwork, and anthropological knowledge encompass all these interactive spaces.

By privileging these concerns with anthropological praxis and poiesis I introduce them as themes integral to my written stories of the people and places of Nuakata, and the fieldwork upon which these stories are based. The text, the fieldwork, and these integral themes are *positioned* by and attempt to *reposition* contemporary feminist, postcolonial, if not postmodern intellectual debates. Within the disciplines of anthropology and its would-be superego, cultural studies, this postmodern intellectual climate has been inflected in vigorous critique of seamless notions of culture, society, and person. Renewed attacks on positivism, proclamations of a “crisis of representation,” and an associated preoccupation with ethnography as texts and ethnographers as authors have also surfaced.⁵ It is a climate “where positioning has become crucial to everyday intellectual practice” (Pile and Thrift 1995, 16).⁶ As a consequence, questions about who speaks for whom in ethnographic texts with what intent and authority⁷ can no longer simply be ignored—even by those who consider these textual preoccupations to be expressions of “epistemological hypochondria” (Geertz 1988, 71, 97), “falsely radical” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 72) or potentially damning authorial lapses into solipsism and narcissism (Probyn 1993; Roth 1989).

By way of response to these issues of epistemology, praxis, and politics I take the last question first, Why do ethnographic fieldwork at a moment when the ethnographic project is called into question? To answer this I return to my earliest conceptions of the field⁸ and thereby trace a personal journey that began with a foray into feminist philosophy, moved into anthropological theory, then finally arrived at an imagined Nuakata. By mapping this journey here in the introduction I explore theoretical terrain that, for the most part, remains concealed in the ethnography that follows.

Surveying the Boundaries: A Foray into Feminist Philosophy

In Search of the Gendered Subject

Pacing the long corridors of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at La Trobe University, Melbourne, desperate for news of my

research visa, I had ample time (twelve months in all) to reflect on my decision to do fieldwork. Born of disenchantment, it was nurtured by a distilled memory of fascination.

For several years prior to making this decision I was engaged in research on a critical, feminist analysis of the gendered subject. I questioned existing ways of thinking (of and about) the subject, agency, and, more broadly, the relationship between sex, gender, and the subject. I brought some basic, perhaps unsustainable, assumptions to my initial research—including a continuing belief and hope in the idea of humankind, “a unity in diversity, a pattern of variations” (Eipper 1990, 60). This belief is central to the “imaginary in anthropology” (1990, 61) and underpins much social scientific research, including feminist research.

Mine was a vague, universal notion of humankind; one in search of ways to *accommodate* differences and find a basis allowing us to respond to one another as more alike than different, more related than unrelated. Although not evident, my research was inspired by the perennial ethical question, How can people justly live with one another? I assumed that answers to this fundamental question lay in our ways of understanding persons or subjects, and from this, their needs, rights, and responsibilities.⁹

Following Mauss’s (1985) seminal essay on the person and the innumerable anthropological testimonies reinforcing his basic claim,¹⁰ I believed that notions of the person and self, and the relationship between the person and self, were socially, culturally, and historically specific. Rather naively, I also considered the term *person* to be a universally significant social category denoting the individual and material human being. The work of Kovel and Benjamin had influenced my thinking to that point (Mallett 1995).¹¹ Combined, their theories had offered me a reconstructed humanist vision of the gendered subject, one that straddled essentialist/nonessentialist, transcultural/cultural, and transhistorical/historical divides. Founded on the view that all human infants are predisposed to helplessness, dependence, and sociability, this subject/self is relational. It is a self or I who is not preexistent, but emerges in relation to and separation from—in recognition of and reflection by—significant caregivers in the first instance. Equally significant, it is a relational self who is conceived and develops within specific sociocultural and historical contexts. In this sense it is a dynamic rather than static, substantive self, a self in process.

In the absence of some other term to speak of individual human

beings, I had seized on the universal social category of the *person* as if it were a life raft. This was a pragmatic decision that I knew to be unsustainable. I clung to this rather hollow vestige of humanism even while persuaded by the claims of Mauss (1985),¹² Lukes (1985), and others that the category itself and the “categorical identification between persons and human beings” may not necessarily exist in, or be relevant to, all societies (Moore 1994c, 32).¹³ I was persuaded too by the related argument that the terms *person*, *subject*, and *self* are irrevocably contaminated by the Western epistemologies that reified them, if not gave them life.¹⁴ But I suspected that in abandoning all humanist categories and constructs, I risked succumbing to a theoretical and political relativism that was ultimately nihilistic. I would come to value and promote difference rather than the creative accommodation of differences.¹⁵

In pursuing answers to my research questions I was forced to confront these issues. For as much as, if not more than, anything else, my questions about gendered subjects sought alternative, sustainable ways of knowing about the person, the self/I. They assumed the symbiotic relationship between the self/I and the ways the self/I is thought, spoken, and embodied. In so doing, they rode on a tidal wave of Western feminist and postmodernist criticism directed at, yet implicitly indebted to, Enlightenment and, more particularly, Cartesian epistemology.¹⁶

Much of this criticism focuses on the Enlightenment metanarratives (Reason, Knowledge, Truth, the Subject, the Author), their unitary, universalist assumptions, their certainties and their histories.¹⁷ Manifestations of Enlightenment Reason—“man,” belief in objectivity, binary oppositions, the privileging of vision and consciousness as a means of knowing¹⁸—are also exposed in these discussions, their influence in Western texts debated. By way of response to these criticisms, some postmodernist writers attempt to counter Reason’s sway in Western knowing by recovering the body, the invisible, the nonrational, the “third term,” “Woman,” *différance* and multiple subjectivities in their theorizing (Foucault 1978, 51, 97; Derrida 1982, 21–22, 25–26; Flax 1990b, 212). Some attempt to translate these tentative and politically strategic ways of knowing into self-consciously experimental texts (e.g., Bataille, Trinh Minh Ha). In so doing they aim to subvert authorial power and epistemological authority by, among other ways, representing multiple voices in their texts, elaborating the poetics of experience, juxtaposing text with subtext(s) on the page, and writing uncertainties. Others, in turn, suggest that these theoretical/textual gestures merely represent rejuvenated forms

of epistemological mastery—mastery of a kind where uncertainty is posited as the only valid alternative to certain knowledge and universal truth. For example, Heller (1990) argues that although these postmodernist theorists resist the temptation to postulate philosophical or scientific theories of the whole, or of absolute truth, they continue to assert themselves as the definitive enunciator of that which cannot be known—of the fragments and truths. Moreover, by rendering people (bodies, women, men, selves) as surfaces upon which multiple and, at times, contradictory discourses are inscribed, some postmodernist theory loses sight of—worse still, abrogates political responsibility for—the everyday experiences, the real life struggles, the defeats and victories, of living, dying people. Such experiences are lost, not between the lines or on the margin of the texts, but through the very body of these works—works that seem more concerned with the form than the content of the stories they tell. Accordingly, their refusal to speak for others also effectively becomes a refusal to speak on behalf of those whose story would otherwise not be heard.¹⁹

Plunging myself headlong into this sea of feminist literature, I soon found myself flailing. My progress was impeded by a lack of agreement in and across feminist and contemporary philosophical texts as to “to what” exactly the terms *subject* and *gender* refer. For example, as Heller notes, in the “contemporary French and German debates, the term subject has assumed the following meanings: point of view; individual; the ‘subject’ of biography; the hermeneutical subject; . . . the subject of knowledge; . . . the political subject; . . . man” (1990, 22). Some conflate subject, self, and I (as I do), variously referring to “it,” either intentionally or unintentionally, as a material entity/essence or identifiable position(s) from which the person acts, speaks. Some conflate subject with subjectivity, rendering it akin to opinion, attitude, or feeling. Others reduce subject to identity, emphasizing the plural and potentially contradictory “I” constructed in and by multiple discourses (Foucault 1978).

Cartesian Methods: A Lesson in Denial

While confusion abounds as to what the term *subject/self* represents, a tacit consensus seems to exist in much of the feminist/philosophical literature about what the subject is not. The rational, universal, implicitly masculine, autonomous Cartesian “I” is emblematic of this negative vision. This rational, thinking “I” stands as a loosely defined Other or

(implicit) object to many, though by no means all, of the feminist incarnations of the gendered subject that have emerged over the past two decades. For this reason I initially turned to Descartes's *Meditations*, hoping to further understand the other progenitor of these feminist accounts. Descartes's theory of knowledge, subject, and method remained as background—sometimes distant, sometimes proximal—to my subsequent prefield, field, and postfield reflections on these matters.

Fueled by Reason and fortified by the Cogito, Descartes embarked on an introspective journey in search of some irrefutable “knowledge of truth” and certainty.²⁰ In making this meditative journey and arriving at a new scientific method and theory of knowledge and the subject, he discarded his own confused lived experience and discounted his “age” and “maturity”—factors that, he declared at the outset, made the journey possible. By dispelling his own doubt and uncertainty, de-emphasizing the epistemological significance of his embodied existence—all that he learned from and through his imaginary, his senses and emotions—and by dismissing as irrelevant his interdependence on others, Descartes was able to conclude that the internalized God-given capacity to think is pivotal to the existence of the “I.” He therefore denied that from the moment of birth the other’s existence is simply there (Pelz 1992), that our earliest experiences of self and of knowing necessarily arise in relation to and with other selves.²¹

Stunted in form, but not in influence, the Cartesian subject’s existence and capacity to know relied upon the subject’s use of the rational scientific method. Unlike his philosophical forebears, most notably Socrates and Plato, Descartes conceived method less as “a path to be followed rationally” and more as an internalized, static “way of reasoning: a precisely ordered mode of abstract thinking” (Lloyd 1984; 1991, 168). Accordingly, neither the subject matter nor the purpose of inquiry determines the correct “order of thought.” Rather, it is the “natural operations” of a unitary mind subjected to “introspection” and guided by reason that underpin this new method (1991, 168). Heidegger notes that “we first arrive at science as research when and only when truth has been transformed into the certainty of representation”—an idea initially encountered in the “metaphysics of Descartes” (1977, 127). Accordingly, “knowing establishes itself as a procedure,” a set of laws that binds itself to “a projected plan of nature” or an already circumscribed field of investigation (1977, 118). It is through the projected plan and a rigorous procedure that the world of objects is represented and explained. “Explan-

tion is always twofold. It accounts for an unknown by means of a known and at the same time it verifies that known by means of that unknown” (Lloyd 1991, 121; see also Taylor 1989, 148–58).

In reading the *Meditations* it was not Descartes’s theory of the subject or “new knowledge” that made most impact on my thinking and imagining about alternative gendered subjects, but the dissonance between his theory and the evident gestatory process that brought it into being. For, unlike many philosophical treatises, the confusing bodily context, conquistadorial motivations, and mental labor integral to its development are neither concealed nor disguised in his text. As Bordo notes, the “dizzying vacillations, the constant questioning of the self, the determination, if only temporary, to stay within confusion and contradiction . . . reveals a dark underside” to his “bold rationalist vision” (1986, 440). It is an underside rendered all the more powerful and intriguing by Descartes’s efforts in the later meditations (four, five, six, and the synopsis) to deny and repress its significance to the end point of the process—a theory combining knowledge, subject, and method that disallows lived, sensory experience as a basis for knowing truth, self, and world. In other words, Descartes represents his context and process for coming to know the subject/I before declaring these experiences and processes irrelevant to the existence of the “I.” Ultimately, then, in what can now be read and experienced as a postmodern twist, the form of his text belies the content of its conclusions. On the one hand, Descartes can be accused of denying the “dark underside” to his thinking and theorizing on rationality. On the other hand, it might be argued that he reveals not only the perilous doubt but also the denial of lived, sensory experience and interdependence on other people, which underpins his “bold rationalist vision.”

Following my reading of the *Meditations* and related secondary texts, I returned to the feminist literature on the gendered subject, convinced, like Descartes, that ideas about the subject are inseparable from those about knowing and method. Unlike him, though, I was also sure that ideas about subject and method are contingent upon both the known and unknown motivations and experiences of us who attempt to represent the “I.” As with the “self/I” these motivations and experiences arise out of, and often in response to, specific contexts and significant interpersonal relations. I was reminded too that research questions themselves, and not just the thoughts and conclusions they elicit, are historically contingent. The questions asked anticipate and constrain the answers elicited. Accordingly, when I returned to the feminist literature, I asked not just

how, but why, and on whose behalf, these gendered subjects are conceived and expressed. Who or what is denied or overlooked in the process? Moreover, I sought a self/I and a means of knowing the self/I that takes account of embodied processes, praxis, and interpersonal relations.

The Sex/Gender Distinction: A Feminist Stumbling Block

It soon became clear that feminist debate on the subject, and the female subject in particular, had polarized and in some instances stalled around a cluster of interrelated issues: essentialism, female difference, the sex/gender distinction, the body, and the politics of voice (who speaks, and for whom). Of these, the essentialist debate seemed the most encompassing and divisive, for it highlighted and reinforced important political and epistemological differences between feminist theorists. Moreover, it constituted a feminist inflection of the long-standing nature/nurture, individual/society debates that continue between and within the social and biological sciences.²²

Engaged in the fight to extend male rights and privileges to women, many early second-wave Anglo-American feminist theories of the gendered self (including feminist anthropological ones) rejected essentialist notions of sexual difference based on reproductive biology, genetics, or morphology. They claimed that by defining women in rigid, immutable terms such theories undermined their attempts to redefine “woman” as man’s equal—a potentially self-constituting, androgynous agent. For this reason, they formulated diverse social constructionist theories to explain the means of “production and organization of female difference” (Fuss 1989, 2).²³

The concept of gender and the sex/gender distinction, conceived in Western epistemology and integrally located in an “individualist problematic” (Haraway 1991, 132), proved pivotal to these strategic feminist analyses of the subject and ideologically based equality and inequality. Sex was understood as an intrinsic biological aspect of the individual person, whereas gender was considered an external sociocultural imposition; somehow internalized as an operational “state” of mind (see Gatens 1983). Like the nature/culture, body/mind, and (more distantly) individual/society, binary oppositions on which it was founded, the sex/gender distinction was sustained by the (social) construction metaphor. It is a metaphor that encodes culturally specific spatial, temporal, and ontological ideas. It suggests that things, structures, ideas, discourses, and gender are elaborated upon passive, preexisting forms, be it the body or the so-

called natural world. These ontological states existed prior to and independent of their elaborations. Accordingly, the sexed body is conceived as the material foundation upon which gender identity is constructed or inscribed upon the body over time.

Since the mid- to late 1980s many feminist theorists have challenged the sex/gender distinction and the social constructionist metaphor upon which it is founded. This challenge represented part of a wider critique of the universal, “masterful” subject and the egalitarian politics that sustained him/her.²⁴ Committed to a politics of difference, feminist theorists resisted the efforts of (some of) their feminist sisters to construct women in the universal man’s image. Indeed, they resisted feminist attempts to construct women in (white, Western, bourgeois liberal, heterosexual) Woman’s image.²⁵ Not only did they emphasize the fundamental differences between men and women, but between women themselves—differences of class, ethnicity, age, and so forth. Much of the impetus for the initial political and theoretical challenge to the universal Woman and the (white) gendered subject came from those originally positioned on the margins of feminist debate—third world feminists, women of color, lesbian feminists, feminist anthropologists, and cultural theorists who have attempted to speak of, for, or alongside them.²⁶

While aware of this work and its potential power to subvert Western, Cartesian ways of knowing, it did not initially capture my attention. Rather, I was drawn to the work of writers such as Butler, Irigaray, Cixous, de Lauretis, I. Young, Braidotti, and Flax.²⁷ Although theoretically diverse, these theorists are united by their efforts to restore female or, more broadly, sexually different bodies to their understanding of the subject/subjectivities and knowing. The body they attempt to recover is not ensnared by hierarchical dualisms and the constructionist metaphor that maintains them, but rather, as Grosz notes, it is the body as it is “interwoven with and constitutive of systems of meaning, signification and representation” (1994, 18). It is the sexually differentiated, or in Braidotti’s case, the ontologically sexed body as it lived, enacted, and experienced. While critical of Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) failure to adequately theorize sexual difference in his account of subjectivity—for using a male model of sexual experiences for representing sexuality—theorists such as Irigaray (1985a, 1985b), Butler (1990), and I. Young (1990) are variously indebted to his phenomenological theory of lived experience and embodied subjectivity (see Grosz 1989, 1994).

Despite her criticism of Merleau-Ponty’s failure to differentiate between men and women’s embodiment, Butler (1990) affirms his under-

standing of sexuality as an integral facet of people's existence, informing their experience of self and world. I. Young (1990) also stresses women's corporeal embodiment, particularly—but not exclusively—pregnant embodiment. In describing and detailing women's corporeal comportment, their movements and actions in space, Young reveals that women's embodied experiences differ from men's, and also from each other's. Her analysis is part of her broader project to subvert notions of the unitary self and reinforce the idea that “any individual subject is a play of differences,” who, because s/he is not a unity, “cannot be present to itself, know itself” (see Benhabib 1992, 197–98; Young 1986, 11).

Irigaray (in what she describes as a tactically inspired feminist mimesis of phallogocentric discourses of the subject and epistemology) posits her own theory of the feminine and the female subject. She contends that woman and mother have been much maligned and denigrated as Man's mere (m)other—bearer for those that beget Wisdom, Knowledge, and Truth. Not content with an analysis of phallogocentrism in Western philosophy, Irigaray (Cixous, too) has attempted to posit an alternative female symbolism based upon women's bodies and the experience of the mother-daughter relationship. Her theory of difference is distinguished by her attempt to posit the bodily and symbolic/discursive roots of real, historically situated women. She describes femininity as “beyond definition” as plural, multiple, fluid, and heterogeneous. Women's psychology is analogous to their morphology and form, a multiplicity located in the body as a mystery that is always plural.

Not only is the body remetaphorized by these theorists but so too are the body's relations to mind, culture, gender, subjectivity, and other bodies. In emphasizing corporeality, however, writers such as Irigaray, Cixous, and even I. Young continue to present and perpetuate an understanding of the body and the subject as text. The metaphors used to describe the body, the subject, risk becoming conflated with the body, the subject.²⁸

Talking about “the Body,” “the Subject,” “the Self”

Asked to present a paper at a feminist social theory seminar, I spoke of these, my initial efforts, to reflect on the body and gendered subjects. The first response was a rebuff: “What you have to say makes no sense to me. You speak from a completely Eurocentric position. This has absolutely no relevance to me as an Indian woman. These terms, these theories, do not speak to my experience.” Several people in the group defended the

ideas discussed. I could not. The statement had found its mark. In my pursuit of a universally relevant and applicable notion of the gendered subject, I had deliberately ignored, but not forgotten, non-Western and anthropological perspectives. I suspected that if I really considered the epistemological challenges they posed, I might ultimately be forced to abandon the ethnocentric language of person, self, subject, agency, even sex and gender. Believing the project to be altogether too difficult, I had contrived to study Western notions of the subject as if the West itself denoted a unified field and intellectual domain.

Like the Indian woman, but possibly for different reasons, I felt estranged from the so-called lived body described. By speaking and writing “the body” in abstract or quasi-universal terms—as a site or surface of inscription, a diffuse essence, ontologically sexed—bodies, including my own body, seemed once again to be circumscribed by the mind, rationality. Ironically, the tangible, living, painiting bodies of actual situated women and men remain obscured. As Mortimer writes:

The body reinserted into the picture is so often the reified body—like the corpse of a drowned stranger that has surfaced amongst a group of swimmers. Where did it come from? What are they to do with it? What is their relationship to it? (1990, 47)

Feeling like one of Mortimer’s swimmers sighting a corpse, I stalled, wondering what to do next. Confronting my own ethnocentrism, I was forced to acknowledge the ethnocentrism of these feminist philosophical theories of the subject, body, sex, and gender—theories that claimed to disrupt Enlightenment phallogocentrism and universalism, yet for the most part ignored different (intellectual and non-Western) ways of knowing, writing, speaking, and enacting notions of the “I.” I realized too that my theoretical forays had assumed a life of their own, cast adrift from their original purpose. Like Descartes’s *Meditations*, the forms of my texts (written and spoken) belied their content.

Extending the Boundaries: Deciding to Do Fieldwork

Thinking Backward

Like Moore and de Lauretis before her, I understood difference to be experienced relationally, both between and within persons.²⁹ It follows, then, that research on similarities and differences between people can be

usefully pursued and, if possible, represented by employing intersubjective methods. Wanting to accommodate difference in my own thinking and writing, rather than simply subsuming expressions of difference in an abstract, disengaged theory, I sought a broader (research and) life experience to confront these issues. For this reason I decided to invigorate my thinking among living people; to ground my explorations in time, place(s), and culture(s), in living lives—my own and other people's. Rather than starting with firm, if not essentialist, concepts of sex, gender, body, and the subject, I wanted to work “back towards them” (Moore 1994c, 27)—to discover rather than assume the relevance of these terms and concepts for people living in different contexts.

If our *universal particularity* is to be significant, and if we are to achieve anything as a *collective singularity*, then we might best strive towards an understanding of embodied subjectivity which does not privilege gender and sexual difference unduly just because we are so uncertain what else it is, if anything, that we share. (1994c, 27, emphasis in original)

By making the decision to do ethnographic fieldwork I recognized that I was following on the well-worn heels of colonial ethnographers, past and present, who went to other, often distant, places to explore the knowledge and practices of other people, “other cultures,” so that they might reflect upon, affirm, or subvert their own. But perhaps with the naïveté that remains a privilege³⁰ and problem of the uninitiated or inexperienced ethnographer, I hoped that the fieldwork experience would provide opportunities for dialogue, for mutual relationships, for discussion of ideas and beliefs. I hoped it would provide an opportunity to explore those experiences I share in common with people living in a different context, as well as those that render us unique, distinct from one another. I imagined that through participant observation in the daily activities of these people both the opportunities and capacity for empathetic, experiential knowledge and genuine dialogue would emerge.

Possibilities for Mutual Understanding

The hope for, indeed belief in, dialogue and mutual understanding between researcher and informants has long been held by proponents of a dialogical or dialectical anthropology, who draw on phenomenological

and hermeneutic philosophical traditions.³¹ Researchers persuaded by the power and efficacy of this methodology follow Gadamer's suggestion that when speakers are open to one another, do not talk past or across one another, and allow themselves to follow rather than direct the conversation, a shared world is created between participants (1975, 330–35). In this shared communicative world the authority and control of the inquiring and interpreting ethnographer are challenged, even ruptured (see Clifford 1988, 43; Dwyer 1979). This point is underlined by Fine, who urges researchers to examine "relations between" our informants and ourselves. This will "get us better data, limit what we feel free to say, expand our minds and constrict our mouths, engage us in intimacy and seduce us into complicity, make us quick to interpret and hesitant to write" (1994, 72).

Although I believed in the possibility of dialogues such as these and thought it vital to strive for this form of mutual understanding in the field, I—like Crapanzano (1992)—considered this a romantic ideal that is rarely, if ever, realized during fieldwork, let alone in ethnographic texts. For dialogues of this kind to occur, the speakers must, apart from any other consideration, be fluent in a common language. Where the ethnographer must learn a language, long experience in the field is required—a luxury afforded very few ethnographers, past and present. Moreover, I agreed with Crapanzano that dialogue "not only reveals but often enough conceals the power relations and the desires that lie behind the spoken word, and, in other contexts, the recorded and distributed word" (1992, 189).

My hope for negotiated conversations, even dialogue, in the field was underpinned by my growing awareness of the relevance of the participant observation methodology for my own research. In proposing to use participant observation and experience as a means to understanding in the field, I was influenced by my select reading of the work of Bourdieu, the "anthropologists of experience" (especially James, Turner, Rosaldo, and Jackson)³² and their phenomenological, existential and hermeneutic philosophical forebears (Dewey, James, Dilthey, Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger, Rorty).³³ Broadly speaking, these anthropologists and their forebears contend that Western philosophy and the scientific empiricism it spawned privilege vision as a metaphor for knowledge and understanding.³⁴ Accordingly, the speculative scientist/philosopher observer sees, extracts, or reveals otherwise concealed facts and timeless truths. Distance and distinction are created between an active spectator and a pas-

sive recipient of the spectator's gaze. In attempting to recuperate touch, sound, smell, taste, kinesthesia, embodiment, and temporality in our ways of knowing, anthropologists who are aligned with phenomenological and existential Western philosophical traditions argue for the exploration of lived experience that

overflows the boundaries of any one concept, any one person, or any one society. As such, it brings us to a dialectical view of life which emphasizes the interplay rather than the identity of things, which denies any sure steadying to thought by placing it always within the precarious and destabilizing fields of history, biography, and time It remains sceptical of all efforts to reduce the diversity of experience to timeless categories and determinate theorems, to force life to be at the disposal of ideas. (Jackson 1989, 2)

Mindful that this concept of experience may be nebulous, speaking for no-body and no-thing in particular, anthropologists of experience attempt to ground their approach "in the actual events, objects, and interpersonal relationships that make up the quotidian world" (Jackson 1989, 2; see also Abrahams 1985, 48–49). In doing this they move away from the "authoritative rhetoric" and ideas of, for example, "custom, tradition, institution" (Abrahams 1985, 46), symbol, identity, even culture.³⁵ And they forgo the intellectual comfort that comes from stable definitions, concepts, and ideas—ideas founded on a belief in clearly bounded relationships between subject and object/other, observer and observed, fact and fiction. Instead, exponents focus upon both the substantive and the dynamic performative aspects of both everyday and occasional, extraordinary experience. The interaction between observer and observed; the tension between stasis and flux, identity and intersubjectivity; the continuity and discontinuity between disparate people's lived experience all capture their attention and imagination.

Central to this approach is the contention that ideas, concepts, or so-called facts do not and cannot "transcend this life-world" (Jackson 1989, 1). They neither mirror immutable essences nor represent foundational laws of nature or being (Rorty 1979), rather they provide a way of indirectly representing and creating meaningful connections between experiences. Experience, then, is not thought of as a neutral domain that is beyond question. While recognizing the inability of language to encapsulate experience, this method relies upon "apposite metaphors, particular

ground rules, and discursive techniques,” particularly narrative (Jackson 1989, 2). Metaphor, allegory, and narrative are all claimed as a means for understanding, thinking, knowing, and acting. They are not, however, posited as ends in themselves (1989, 152).

Given their interest in the relationship of body, sense, emotion, and praxis to understanding and intersubjective knowing, it is quite remarkable that these experiential and dialogic anthropologists largely overlook the ways their own sexed or gendered experience and that of their participant informants contribute to their knowing. In the texts of Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger, Dilthey, and Dewey, on whom they draw, this elision can be understood as both cause and effect of the unchallenged phallogocentrism that pervaded Western philosophical thought (see Hodge 1988; Jaggar 1983). However, it is astounding that such elisions can occur in anthropological texts written during and after the onset of the second wave of feminist theory. These anthropologists perpetuate the view that sexual difference and gender belong to women. Consideration of the relationship between sexual difference, gender, and lived experience is left to feminist anthropologists whose ideas and preoccupations have long been marginalized from the masculine mainstream of the discipline.³⁶

Why Melanesia? Why Milne Bay?

Having decided to do fieldwork, the question remained, Where would I go? Several factors influenced my decision to work in Melanesia and, more specifically, Milne Bay Province—among them my awareness of the area gained from doing undergraduate anthropology courses with Martha Macintyre. As a result, some of the ethnographic writings of Macintyre, M. Young, Battaglia, Munn, Thune, A. Weiner, Chowning, Lepowsky, and their anthropological forebears Malinowski, Roheim, and Fortune were both familiar and fascinating to me. Even so, it was not until I went to and returned from Nuakata that my reading of, and between the lines of, these and other Massim ethnographies became animated.

Milne Bay was vaguely familiar to me prior to my undergraduate study. During World War II my father served in the Australian Navy and spent much of his active service at Giligili army base in Milne Bay. When I was a child he spoke little about his wartime experience. Milne Bay was only known to me through the occasional anecdotes he reluctantly volunteered—anecdotes that included memorable refrains about the jungle,

pythons, and friendly, helpful fuzzy-wuzzy people.³⁷ Therefore, although seeming remote, even wild, Milne Bay was never completely exotic to me as a child. It was always already a colonized realm, a realm existing on the frontiers of my familial experience, my familial imaginary; a place and time that belonged, like my father's faded wartime snapshots, to World War II.

In deciding to do fieldwork in Milne Bay there was a sense, then, in which I was retracing my father's footsteps and, more significant, Martha's and the small stream of ethnographers who had gone before me to some of the many islands that make up the province. I was following and extending this ethnographic lineage. In my imagination I was journeying to a culturally distinctive place and people with elaborate mortuary ceremonies, complex forms of (Kula) gift exchange, matrilineal kinship, an ongoing practice of sorcery and witchcraft, and a history of Wesleyan Methodist Christian missionizing spanning a century.³⁸ But I also thought of it as a region with a violent past—a place bloodied by World War II and, before that, with a regional history of cannibalism and interisland warfare. Above all, though, I thought of it as a place or region where the similarities between the local people and myself would outweigh the differences and where, as these multiple others had testified, the possibilities for friendship and mutual understanding were real. The “field” I imagined was therefore shaped and defined in significant ways by the disciplinary field of Melanesianist anthropology and the historical experience of other people.

The Partible Person

While these factors were the most significant influences in my decision to do fieldwork on an island in Milne Bay, it was my reading of the work of Marilyn Strathern—particularly *The Gender of the Gift*—that challenged me to pursue questions about gender, person, and knowing in a specific Melanesian place, and a clearly defined time. Elaborating on themes present in her earlier work, Strathern, in *The Gender of the Gift*, explores the epistemological conundrums created by anthropology’s use of Western analytical constructs to theorize Melanesian epistemology of the self, gender, agency, and gendered exchange (1988, 7). As Biersack cogently summarizes, it is Strathern’s broad aim “to use ‘the analytical categories in the symbolic systems of those studied’ (1988, 133) to develop an ‘endogenous’ analysis of the status of women in Melanesia and the

character of Melanesian sociality" (1991, 147). Simply put, Strathern aims to "understand Melanesians in their own terms" (Biersack 1991, 152).

In attempting this task, she acknowledges her inability to "extract" herself from the specific Western cultural way of knowing and explaining that underpins much anthropological writing on Melanesia. Wanting to sustain an ongoing argument with these Western ideas and metaphysical assumptions, she attempts to make their "workings visible," to "exploit their reflexive potential" in her own narrative. To this end she employs three analytical axes—we/they (Western/Melanesian), gift/commodity, and feminism/anthropology—to reveal the particular features and characteristics of Melanesian sociality. These binary axes are posited as textually strategic fictions, specifically elaborated in her "plot" that seeks to reveal "the contextualised nature of indigenous constructs by exposing the contextualised nature of analytical ones" (M. Strathern 1988, 8). Not only does Strathern locate these analytical constructs in the social and cultural contexts in which they were produced, but she also attempts to demonstrate their specific purpose or intent.

In strategically employing this us/them divide, Strathern does not mean to imply that Melanesian societies are "timeless" or "monolithic." Nor does she consider them static objects of knowledge. Rather, she aims to scrutinize and expose the descriptive and exegetical practices of anthropology; to highlight the reality that "our thoughts come already formed, we think through images," metaphors, and analogies derived from our own social origins. She contends that anthropological exegesis—including her own analysis—*decodes* the way people represent themselves by explicating the values, expectations, and significance that they attribute to events and artifacts. Through the writing process a "parallel world to the perceived world" is created. It is a parallel, textual world with its own demands and "conditions of intelligibility" (1988, 16–17).

In setting down the "conditions of intelligibility" for her own text, Strathern insists that the world of Melanesian persons, people, and collectivities (groups) cannot be understood through the Western distinction between the individual and society and the related subject/object, nature/culture, domination/dominated, cause/effect antinomies. Indeed, she comments that

there is no indigenous supposition of a [static, bounded] society that lies over or above or is inclusive of individual acts and unique events.

There is no [hierarchical] domain that represents a condensation of social forces controlling elements inferior or in resistance to it. (1988, 102)

Moreover, the Western notion of the autonomous individual person who exists “in a permanently subjective state”—the independent agent, author, or cause of his/her own actions—does not apply to Melanesian persons (1988, 338). As such, gender, values, ideas, and conventions are not imposed or constructed on Melanesian persons by an autonomous, independent society or culture. Unlike Western individuals, Melanesian persons do not conceive of themselves as “proprietors” who own or are owned by culture or society. Indeed, they do not own personal characteristics such as gender. In short, the “commodity logic” integral to Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment Western thought does not pervade Melanesian notions of personhood (1988, 322). Rather, according to Strathern,

Melanesian persons are as dividually as they are individually conceived. They contain a generalised sociality within. . . . Indeed, persons are frequently constructed as the plural and composite site of the [consanguineal and affinal, male and female] relationships that produced them. (1988, 13)

In using the notion of sociality, understood as “the creating and maintaining of relationships” (1988, 13), Strathern provides a “mirror image” of the Western notion of society. Similarly, the “composite [Melanesian] person” is intended to critically reflect the Western individual. She argues that “creating a kind of mirror-imagery gives form to our thought about the differences” between ideas derived from distinct social origins (1988, 17). Given her sensitivity to the distinct social origins of ideas, it is somewhat ironic that the term she uses to describe the distinct form of Melanesian personhood, *dividual*, is derived from Marriot’s reflections on South Asian theories of the person. Marriot states that

persons are generally thought by South Asians to be “dividual” or divisible. To exist, dividual persons absorb heterogeneous material influences. They must give out from themselves particles of their own coded substances—essences, residues, or other active influences—that may then reproduce in others something of the nature of the persons in

whom they have originated. (Marriot, cited in M. Strathern 1988, 348 n. 7)

Following Marriot, Strathern's characterization of the Melanesian person also includes an understanding of the Melanesian notion of the body as partible, relational. It is an understanding that is underpinned by Gregory's (1982) theoretical discussion of the distinction between gifts and commodities. Strathern asserts that through social relations and material exchanges, Melanesian "persons appropriate, absorb and consume nothing other than 'things'—parts of persons/relations in attachable and detachable form" (1988, 191–224, 225–67; 1993, 90). The valued and transacted things of which Strathern speaks are not Western commodities—inanimate objects alienated from their producer and exchanged between independent individuals. Rather, they are inalienable gifts that "circulate as parts of persons" (1988, 178), thereby establishing relationships with other persons or subjects. The relationship, rather than the thing itself, is the subject of the exchange (1988, 19).

Strathern's understanding of the Melanesian notion of the person as a "social microcosm" (1988, 13, 131) both necessitates and is inseparable from her identification of a distinctive form of Melanesian agency and social action. Accordingly, the person, as a register or site of dynamic social relations, is a living expression of, and gives living expression to, those relations (1988, 131). In other words, the person's actions and interactions are not only contingent upon the actions of multiple others, past and present, but his/her actions "externalise the parts or relations of which they are . . . composed" (Mosko 1992, 702). Action is not understood as the self-determined, independent expression of a person's free will. Instead, a person's actions in any given context are evoked, generated, or caused by the particular relations that constitute him/her. In differentiating between agent and person, Strathern writes:

The person is construed from the vantage point of the relations that constitute him or her; she or he objectifies and is thus revealed in those relations. The agent is construed as the one who acts because of those relationships and is revealed in his or her actions. If a person is an agent seen from the point of view of her or his relations with others, the agent is the person who has taken action with those relations in view. In this the agent constitutes a "self." . . . The separation between agent and the person who is the cause of his or her acts is systemic, and governs

the Melanesian perception of action. To act as one's own cause becomes an innovation on this convention. (1988, 273)

In refining her understanding of social action and Melanesian sociality, Strathern states that two forms of plurality—"the composite and the dual"—underpin social relations between single persons or collectivities (groups) in Melanesia. People move from one form of sociality to another, "from a unity (manifested collectively or singly) to that unity split or paired with respect to another" (1988, 14). Strathern insists that one of the main ways that this shift between dual and composite plurality—or between identity and difference—is conceptualized is through gender.

Single, composite persons do not reproduce. . . . It is dyadically conceived relationships that are the source and outcome of action. The products of relations—including the persons they create—inevitably have dual origins and are thus internally differentiated. This internal, dualistic differentiation must in turn be eliminated to produce the unitary individual. (1988, 14)

Gender and gender difference are relational, according to Strathern's formulation of Melanesian personhood. Because Melanesian persons are constituted dualistically, because they are understood to comprise male and female parts/relations, it is only in specific relational contexts, or indeed through specific material exchanges, that "being 'male' or being 'female' emerges as a 'holistic unitary state'" (1988, 14). Accordingly, same-sex relations generate different "productive outcomes" than cross-sex relations (1988, 324). As persons are imagined in dualistic forms—male and female, same sex and cross-sex—a person can also be understood as embodying "one of a pair of interrelated forms" (1988, 338).

Although introduced as textual fictions—analytical axes, rather than strict binary pairs—Strathern's oppositions arguably function as suspect facts. If this is not true for the author and those who have appropriated her strategic representation of Melanesian personhood (see Battaglia 1990; Foster 1995), then it is certainly true for readers, like myself, who remain suspicious of ahistorical and unitary conceptions of culture and the person.³⁹ Macintyre writes:

That M. Strathern acknowledges the artifice [of “Western” versus “Melanesian”] which entails the convergence of the social, the economic and the cultural in terms of a geographically defined entity . . . does not remove the problems of empiricism—those very problems that she sets her argument against. . . . This dichotomy brings with it the complications of essentialisation and Occidentalism (Carrier 1992), and the representation of culture as ahistorical and hypostatic. It is as if the intrusion of Europeans into Melanesia, and the changes they wrought, can only be understood as epiphenomenal. (1995, 29)

Critical of anthropology’s pursuit of the exotic (Keesing and Jolly 1992), and of the organicist discourses of alterity that sustain these endeavors, proponents of what Foster (1995) terms the New Melanesian History encourage (Melanesianist) anthropologists to write of the complex relations between us and them, the West and Melanesia.⁴⁰ Like Macintyre, they claim that the Western/Melanesian dichotomy essentializes epistemological, cultural, or personal differences, thereby de-emphasizing the “similarities between Melanesian and Western social realities, similarities generated out of shared histories of colonialism and commerce” (Foster 1995, 2–3; see Thomas 1991, 52–59). Arguably then, us/them dichotomies not only suppress details of the multiple intersections between Western and Melanesian peoples, they also conceal the diverse effects of these relations. As Clifford notes, those who employ us/them dichotomies present cultures “as organically unified or traditionally continuous” rather than “negotiated” and “contested” present processes (1988, 273).

It is precisely this aspect of Strathern’s work that most troubles Macintyre. She claims that Strathern’s presentation of the Melanesians as unified, wholesome, and devoid of conflict denies past and present (pre-colonial and postcolonial) forms of conflict and malevolent relations in these diverse communities (1995, 33). Not only does it romanticize Melanesian sociality but it also represents an “ahistorical,” if not “utopian,” “reification” of Melanesian ideas of personhood and relations between persons and things (1995, 34). Although Macintyre suggests that Strathern’s representation of Melanesian notions of embodiment is limited, if not inadequate, she agrees that “the construction of the person as a social being . . . is metaphorised through the human body” (1995, 32). However, she cannot accept Strathern’s contention that

Melanesian representations do not objectify persons or create and perpetuate subject/object, animate/inanimate antinomies. Drawing on her fieldwork experience on Tubetube, Macintyre argues that claims to the effect that “Melanesians do not use organicist concepts as metaphors or analogies, nor make distinctions between abstract notions of ‘what bodies do or symbolise’ and bodies as substantial entities” are unsustainable (1995, 33). As with the related idea that Melanesians understand the physical person/body to be literally created through the incorporation of gift relations expressed through the exchange of things with others, Strathern’s presentation of Melanesian ways of knowing and understanding represents “too neat an inversion of Western ideas” (1995, 33). Her claims not only imply that Melanesians think in concrete rather than abstract terms, but they also deny the influence of Western (Cartesian) ways of knowing and understanding.

Jolly (1992b) also challenges Strathern’s characterization of Melanesian personhood by questioning the status of the oppositions of Western individual and Melanesian composite person. Reflecting on the significance of the notion of the individual in Western contexts, she states:

If we look not just at liberal philosophies of the individual, and the normative structures of American psychology but at the ethnography of our daily practice as persons in relation to each other, the individual seems more permeable and partible. Do we never see persons as composites of relations? Do we not recognise agency elicited by others rather than always as the action of a motivated individual? (1992b, 146)

Contemplating doing fieldwork, I accepted many of the criticisms made of Strathern’s work and remained suspicious of her reliance on the seemingly postmodern,⁴¹ Western metaphors of partibility, multiplicity, and decomposition to represent Melanesian sociality and personhood (see Josephides 1991). Despite these reservations, I continued to be challenged and inspired by her efforts to subject “Western conceptual systems to deconstructive scrutiny” (Keesing and Jolly 1992, 241). While not persuaded by her strategic use of us/them dichotomies, I nonetheless recognized her analysis as a highly original and incisive attempt to conceive and describe Melanesian sociality. Like Foster (1995, 3–5), I saw the value of combining critical reflection on the (literary) form, structure, and terms of anthropological analysis, with an acceptance that the actions of Melanesians arise out of distinct “historical and cultural origins.”

Foster argues for the development of a “New Melanesian Anthropology” that combines New Melanesian History with the Western/Melanesian distinction expounded by Strathern.

[It] must begin with the recognition that Melanesians understand themselves and act in terms—sometimes oppositional, sometimes syncretic—conditioned by the continuing encounter between agencies of (post) colonial states, capitalism, and Christianity, on one side, and highly localised practices for making meaning, on the other. (1995, 5)

Convinced of the need for ethnographic descriptions to acknowledge colonialism’s history in Melanesia, he nevertheless cautions against privileging this history in all ethnographies. To do so risks promoting the ethnocentric “presupposition that Melanesian history and culture must be construed in relation to agents and agencies *originating elsewhere*” (1995, 13, emphasis in original). As Foster (following Sahlins 1993) suggests, it risks equating “colonial history with the history of the colonisers” (1995, 14). Equally pertinent, it also implies that the history of the colonizers, both within and outside of the colonies, remained independent and unaffected by the acts, precepts, and knowledge of the colonized (see Stoler 1991). Therefore, in attempting to understand and write these histories, Melanesian ethnographers and historians alike must remain mindful that the radical oppositions between them and us are fictions. They must also remain mindful of cultural difference. Clearly then, the New Melanesian Anthropology that Foster champions poses both an ethnographic and a methodological “challenge” (1995, 16).

Like Foster, I was convinced of the need for Melanesian anthropology to make its assumptions explicit, including “what it takes to be Melanesian assumptions” (Foster 1995, 18). However, I did not believe that ethnography was best served by the self-conscious and strategic use of us/them dichotomies. Such artifice accords clarity of a type, but it is a type that, as Strathern herself acknowledges, de-emphasizes the potentially fluid boundaries between them and us. It also obfuscates the temporal, processual, and relational dimensions of ethnographic understanding.

Why Research Sickness and Health?

In defining and refining my research field, I sought a focus for reflection on local notions of the gendered self/person and the ways of knowing and

acting that inform these ideas. Given my interest in the ways people conceive the relations between body, mind, and spirit, these research interests seemed best accommodated through a potentially practical study of sickness and health. By focusing on health and sickness—particularly women's experience of pregnancy, childbirth, and breast-feeding—I hoped to learn of, and subsequently represent, the lived experience of some Milne Bay women, without ignoring the related lived experience of men. By retaining a focus on men, and the relations between men and women associated with sickness, health, birth, and death, I hoped to avoid some of the problems arising from women-centered studies in feminist anthropology. Foremost among them is the conflation of women with gender and gendered subjectivity (see Eisenstein 1984; Moore 1988). Also, given my interest in Strathern's notion of partibility, I could hardly neglect men in my research.

To further my research on women's lived experience of sickness and health, I intended to study the impact of Western-style primary health care on local knowledge and practices relating to the gendered person/self. In so doing, I aimed to consider some of the factors influencing the utilization of island and mainland health services. My research agenda was thus compatible with the critical interpretive approaches to medical anthropology.

While not without their own limitations, critical medical anthropologists subject the terms, parameters, and social/political outcomes of “conventional” medical anthropological research to much-needed deconstructive scrutiny (Good 1994; Hahn 1995; Lock and Schepers-Hughes 1990; Morsy 1990; Singer 1989).⁴² Exponents of this approach propose alternative research strategies and directions for the anthropology of sickness and health. These include recognition of the interconnection between microlevel and macrolevel social relations and processes, recognition of the transformative power of global capitalism, an understanding of disease as a social and biological product, recognition of Western biomedicine's attempts to dominate and replace other medical systems at all levels of health care in diverse contexts, and recognition and representation of the social-relational dimensions of people's experience of suffering (Singer 1990, 182–85).⁴³

Rather than projects focused on the beliefs and practices of “alternative medical systems,” critical interpretive medical anthropology concentrates on the cultural construction of all knowledge pertaining to sickness, health, and the sentient human body. Accordingly, cultural

knowledge and practices are recognized as “dynamic processes” that are continually negotiated. While eschewing extreme forms of cultural relativism, it avoids the importation of Western medical concepts into the analysis of the dialogue between anthropologist and informant. Embedded in the critical interpretive anthropological tradition (see Keesing 1987), the critical medical anthropology expounded by Lock and Schepers-Hughes (1990) focuses on the relation between what they call the three bodies: the individual body, the social body, and the body politic. They suggest that critical medical anthropology must first “describe the variety of [conscious and unconscious] metaphorical conceptions about the body and associated narratives” before then showing the “social, political and individual uses to which these conceptions are applied in practice” (1990, 49–50). This approach to the study of sickness and health grew out of a critical engagement with phenomenological and hermeneutic knowledge and practices. Consistent with a Melanesian anthropology that is not wedded to the strategic use of us/them dichotomies, it came closest to my intended method of research.

Writing Ethnography

As Clifford rightly states, “ethnography is, from beginning to end, enmeshed in writing” (1988, 25). But people, places, and things are not (or not literally) texts, however integrally related they may be in both their imagined or actual manifestations. It is a point that bears reiterating at a time when discussion of ethnography has been subsumed by critical literary debate about texts and issues of authority and authorship.⁴⁴

Two seminal works—Clifford’s (1988) essay “On Ethnographic Authority” and Geertz’s *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*—have arguably perpetuated the conflation of field with text, and fieldwork with writing. Using ethnographic authority as an analytic prism, Clifford explores how the ethnographer’s messy research experiences become authoritative cultural interpretations. In detailing some of the theoretical shortcomings and advantages of experiential, interpretive, dialogical, or polyphonic paradigms for “embodying authority” in ethnographic texts, he reminds us that we should not mistake textual representations for the fieldwork experience. For example, he is clear that the dialogues reproduced in the text are the ethnographer’s representation of dialogue and, as such, do not render the texts dialogical. But by the same token neither should we treat the issue of authority in the text

as the key epistemological/methodological problem faced by ethnographers. What is or can be done in the field should not be conflated with what is or can be done in the text. The various dilemmas posed by participant observation fieldwork and the speculation and imagining that precedes it are never merely textual issues.

At one point Geertz quite explicitly states that anthropologists “have been willed, not as so often thought, a research method, ‘Participant Observation’ (that turns out to be a wish, not a method) but a literary dilemma, ‘Participant Description’” (1988, 33). In Geertz’s hands, epistemological dilemmas—associated with intersubjective knowing, the identity of the ethnographer, the ability of the ethnographer to understand the experiences of others, if not the ethnographic project itself—become textual issues of authorship, “writely” identity, narrative, and discourse construction. Critical, even dismissive, of the self-reflexive “I-witness” experimental ethnographies reservedly embraced by Clifford (1988, 1989), Geertz argues that ethnographers deceive themselves if they believe that authorial confessions of ethnocentrism and subjectivity, and the use of transcribed fieldwork conversations, render their texts more transparent and authentic. In short, they fool themselves if they believe that “to be a convincing ‘I-witness’” they must first “become a convincing ‘I’” (Eipper 1996, 20; Geertz 1988, 78–79). Geertz claims that these texts risk becoming “author saturated” explorations of the self by the “detour of the other.”

Geertz’s criticisms are persuasive, indeed necessary, particularly if a primary aim of these texts is dispersal of authorship and authority. For, as both Geertz and Clifford recognize, ethnography remains the “virtuoso orchestration by a single author of all the discourses in his or her text” (Clifford 1988, 50). Indeed, Moore argues that even multiple and collaboratively authored texts are “far from radical,” for they do “not in fact revise the standard anthropological notion of authorship, of what it is to author something, they . . . simply make it plural” (1994c, 117). Moreover, whatever the number of authors, *if* the writer(s) of reflexive ethnography believe that the “I” of the text is the same as the “I” that writes the text, then they mistake fiction for fact.

If authors of reflexive texts believe that reflection on their self/selves in the text represents a radical, postmodernist deconstruction of subject/selves, then they are deceived (see Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Moore 1994c, 127–28). They confuse experience with representation of that experience, but, more importantly, they fail to appreciate that the

reflexive turn to oneself is born of romanticism and modernism—the modernist ideals of self-examination, and self-mastery in particular (see Taylor 1989, 176).

By framing his critique in terms of authorship and authority, Geertz, like Clifford, effectively recasts the ethnographer as author, rather than participant observer. In addition, methodological dilemmas associated with participant observation are recast as textual issues about the way experience is authorized. Although incisive, this critique of the authorization of experience obfuscates as much as it clarifies. By emphasizing the writing process, Geertz and Clifford, in their different ways, deflect attention from the integral methodological relationship between participant observation and writing (Eipper 1996; Jackson 1989, 156–87). The multifaceted nature and purpose of ethnographic witnessing are overlooked (Eipper 1996), as is its significance for anthropological knowledge creation. For ethnography “is a revelatory mode of knowledge; it results from a doubling of testimony: the ethnographer folds one kind of witnessing into another” (1996, 16). There is the witnessing that occurs in the field and the witnessing to that witnessing that occurs in the text.

As a species of reportage ethnographic writing is *nothing* if not testimonial—this is its rationale and its virtue. . . . [I]ts epistemological status rests upon the experiential warrant which is its *raison d'être*. We trust it because it seeks to represent, if not reality (whatever that is) then the *actual*—the world as the ethnographer *engaged* with it. . . . We are writers almost by default; it is our witnessing which defines us.
(Eipper 1996, 24–25, emphasis in original)

Therefore, it is not only in the text that the ethnographer must confront what it means to be a faithful “I-witness,” s/he must also confront this in the field, and in later conversations and oral re-presentations of the lived field. After all, anthropology is not only a written, but also a visual and verbal tradition. These forms of witnessing rely on mutual respect and trust between informants, ethnographer, and audience. The ethnographer must then gain the respect and trust of readers, viewers, and listeners when she witnesses to her own and others’ witnessing, testifies to her own and others’ testimonies. While

this may entail establishing (in certain respects almost inevitably) our authority with them, the process is not reducible to that. Equally

important in the field (if not on the page) will be our character and conduct—not to mention the enduring ether of socio-historical circumstance which informs and misinforms ethnographer and ethnographee alike. (1996, 23)

Eipper suggests that trust, unlike authority, cannot be “controlled” or “established as a textual strategy.” It must be volunteered. Little is guaranteed when the ethnographer attempts to render herself a convincing “I-witness” by becoming a convincing “I.” How, then, should the ethnographer bear witness in the text? How should she witness to her own and others’ witnessing? What, if anything, can she do to establish her testifying, textual self as trustworthy? In contemplating this prior to fieldwork, to me the conclusion to Clifford’s essay hinted at a way forward.

Experiential, interpretive, dialogical and polyphonic processes are at work, discordantly, in any ethnography, but coherent presentation presupposes a controlling mode of authority. . . . [T]his imposition of coherence on an unruly textual process is now inescapably a matter of strategic choice. (Clifford 1988, 54)

Given this, and since “naive claims to the authority of experience” (1988, 54) have been convincingly challenged, the contemporary ethnographer must first consider why she has chosen a particular way to bear witness in the text. Such a decision is necessarily contingent upon whom, what, and how she witnessed in the field and for/to whom the text is witnessing. The testifying self she textually presents is not only contingent upon personal and ethical factors, but on the context in which she writes. In choosing how she bears witness she must also consider the specific object and intended social and political outcome of the research. In so doing, she will confront, either directly or indirectly, knowingly or unknowingly, the questions, What can be known? How can it be known? Who knows? For whom is it known? If Bourdieu’s pragmatic notion of methodological pluralism is extended to the ethnographic text, then the various representations of selves, of authority in the text, can be understood both as ends to strategic fieldwork means and as strategic means to epistemological, political, and social ends—be they personal, communal, or disciplinary.⁴⁵

In wanting to tell the stories of people’s experience of sickness, health, and knowing—stories that would otherwise only be heard by people’s

neighbors and kin—I recognized that I was committing myself to a “limited, fallible and ill-informed mode of knowledge making,” one that “eschews all pretensions to absolutism and omniscience” (Eipper 1996, 22). The ethnography would not constitute certain definitive knowledge, but, rather, it would present and re-present uncertain feelings and knowing. My imagined readers, the people who would witness my witnessing, were a heterogeneous group. They included the people with whom I would research, my husband, anthropologists, feminist and cultural theorists, Papua New Guinea health administrators, friends, and family! In contemplating how to accommodate these diverse readers and readings, I was guided by several principles. I wanted all the readers to recognize and identify, at least in part, with the lives and living dilemmas of the people represented in the text, including my own personal dilemmas as ethnographer.

Clear that the ethnography would be my testimony to my own and others’ testimonies, I nevertheless wished to faithfully represent what they said or did, when, where, and with whom. While I did not believe it possible to represent people as they would represent themselves, I believed it important to try to keep faith with what they said or did with me in the field (see Neumann 1992, 118–24). Following Fabian, I hoped to represent myself in the (spatiotemporal) world occupied by the people with whom I lived. Fabian argues that by rendering the other as temporally and spatially distinct from the subject, anthropology has been complicit in the Western colonial appropriations of the spaces and times of its others (1983, 143–44). He argues for the restoration of intersubjective time and communication as a form of praxis. Upon my return from Nuakata, I was so intrigued by the intersubjective process of coming to know in the field that I decided I had to attempt to represent this process in any text I produced.

Ethnographic Feminism, Feminist Ethnography, or a Feminist’s Ethnography?

What happens when [a] . . . woman who experiences in her body and mind and imagination does social theory, studying human beings in society who also experience in their body and mind and imagination? Social theory, I would suggest, still tends to function as an exercise in disenchantment. Analytic mastery is the name of the game, with

notions of understanding and control still closely linked. There is a kind of fear associated with admitting that we are ourselves and are, in our analysis, dealing with passionate, embodied people, prone to romanticism and capable of volatility. A kind of laundering occurs which shrinks the object under investigation. (Mortimer 1990, 45)

When Mortimer asks, What if I talked like a woman right here in public? she dares social theorists, male and female alike, to render the experience of passionate embodied humanity present in their theory.⁴⁶ Dissatisfied with social scientific approaches that objectify, partition, and launder out the emotional, romantic connections between people (particularly between mother and child), Mortimer entreats theorists to take both their own and others' lived experiences of sensual, fleshy "interactive human beings" seriously. Eschewing objectified notions of the body, mind, and imagination, she challenges us to speak of relationships—our tangible connection with one another—rather than merely chronicling the objective conditions in which these relations arise (1990, 46). Like the anthropologists of experience, it is meaning she seeks. Not the meaning that is distilled in eternal realms, providing a template for existence, but the meaning born of tangible, fleshy, finite relationships. To this end, she urges us to forsake the comforts, the certain trajectory, of traditional empirical paths and clearly bounded, objective fields of investigation—the modernist route leading to certain Certainty, Truth, Knowledge, and Freedom. In making our escape we are not compelled to retrace our steps, noting the ones we avoided on the original journey—we are spared the indifferent nihilist stomp backward over old ground. Instead we are encouraged to move along tentatively, speaking our "hopes and values," yet without sure knowledge of our destination. In committing ourselves to this path we must have the courage to challenge and replace the sign-posts (the language, the semantic fields) for those that follow. They, too, must do the same.

[A]s we know, the destabilisation of language may pave the way for loosening up our categories, freeing ourselves from reified thinking and closure. And this is not just a fugitive freedom. If we recognise there is no linguistic safety zone or prison house, we might put aside the fear of naming that characterises much present social theoretical discourse. (Mortimer 1990, 64)

Among many other things, the work that follows represents a response to Mortimer's dare. It is my stuttering attempt to talk as a woman, as a feminist and an anthropologist, but, above all, as someone who conceives herself as interdependent upon negotiated relationships with people, men and women, young and old alike. Certainly it is a work written by a self-identified feminist—someone who remains committed to identifying and alleviating women's oppression and empowering those who are disempowered—but is it (a) feminist ethnography? The answer to this question depends on how one defines feminist anthropology and ethnography.

Feminist anthropology is typically considered a politically motivated and informed mode of interpretation and critique of gender relations, if not women's lives in diverse cultural contexts (Behar 1995; Behar and Gordon 1995; Cole and Phillips 1995; di Leonardo 1991; Moore 1988). It is neither a unitary field nor an uncontested one. Since its emergence in the late 1970s, the political aims and theoretical foci of feminist anthropology have changed as they have influenced and been influenced by feminist, anthropological, postmodern, and postcolonial debates. Despite the differing theoretical positions and political objectives of feminist anthropologists, feminist anthropology remains broadly committed to exposing and resisting the domination of women by men. Arising out of the "anthropology of women," which sought to redress male bias in the discipline—particularly, biased ethnographic representations of women—feminist anthropology quickly developed a critique of the universal category "woman" and related claims about the universal subordination of women. Keen to avoid (further) marginalization within the discipline of social anthropology, feminist anthropology shifted its focus from women and "women studying women" to gender and gender relations. It thereby sought to engender anthropological knowledge and focus critical attention on notions of difference, a preoccupation that continues today. Contemporary feminist anthropology is concerned not just with gender differences but more specifically with the intersection between gender, race, class, sexuality, and age differences. It is interested in the way these differences are produced, and their effects, both within and between women, and between men and women. Concerned with the production of these differences within anthropological and feminist discourses, it challenges the commonly held assumption within anthropological discourse that these differences are somehow secondary to the master trope of cultural difference.

The publication of *Writing Culture* in 1986 renewed many feminist anthropologists' interest in and commitment to textual innovation. Feminist anthropologists were incensed by Clifford's (1986, 20–21) claim that they had been excluded from the book because their textual innovations were neither particularly feminist nor novel. By way of response, some pointed to the long history of innovative, experimental women's writing within the discipline and noted that even recent feminist reclamations of this work had been overlooked or marginalized. In making this critique they questioned the constitution of the anthropological canon.⁴⁷ While some examined the gendered power relations that perpetuate the "erasure of contemporary women's writing in sociocultural anthropology" (Lutz 1990), others drew attention to pathbreaking feminist anthropological contributions to theoretical debates about knowledge and representation.⁴⁸ Others, who concurred with Clifford's observations, began to explore the possibilities for and define the parameters of feminist ethnography, distinct from, yet clearly related to, feminist anthropology. Where feminist anthropology sought to understand and critique women's oppression by men, feminist ethnography was primarily concerned with the development of innovative, if not experimental, feminist ethnographic texts.⁴⁹ Several articles, one by Stacey (1988), two by Abu-Lughod (1990, 1991), and another by Visweswaran (1988), have proved pivotal to the emergence of this diverse and contested field.

Stacey (1988) argues that a truly feminist ethnography is an impossible ideal, because the feminist political imperative to promote collaborative, respectful, and reciprocal research relations and methods is at odds with the exploitation inherent to ethnographic research. Placed and placing herself in a position of power in the field, the ethnographer must constantly negotiate her potentially conflicting roles as confidant, friend/fictive kin, and researcher. These ethical dilemmas are compounded in the text that, however collaborative, ultimately and inevitably remains the product of the researcher. In both articulating and producing her own partially feminist ethnography,⁵⁰ Stacey draws on postmodernist and experimental ethnographic forms that recognize the partial nature of ethnographic truth. She argues for ethnographies that are accessible, self-critical, and mindful of the theoretical and narrative strategies they employ.

Similarly, Abu-Lughod (1990) advocates for accessible feminist ethnographies that balance literary and popularist styles, while maintaining their focus on the particulars of individual women's lives. More opti-

mistic than Stacey about the possibilities of and for feminist ethnography, she argues for texts that are attuned to issues of race, ethnicity, class, and power relations between the ethnographer and those with whom she researches. She urges feminist anthropologists to experiment with the form of their ethnographies, while remaining sensitive to the political implications of the metaphors, the textual choices, and the narrative strategies they employ.

In considering the possibilities for and limitations of feminist ethnography, Abu-Lughod—and, to a much lesser extent, Stacey—emphasizes the ethical, political, and epistemological issues associated with writing feminist ethnography. Many other feminist ethnographers also focus on ethnographic texts, variously reflecting on the relationship between ethnography and autobiography,⁵¹ issues of style and genre,⁵² the purposes and projects of feminist ethnography,⁵³ modes of reflexivity, the status and political implications of ethnographic knowledge,⁵⁴ and feminist diversity.⁵⁵ Other feminist ethnographers, however, are highly critical of the apparent conflation of feminist ethnography with texts, arguing that equal attention should be given to the research process and the methods employed in the field. As such, they claim that the feminist researcher must remain aware of how she affects the research process and its outcomes. She should, they insist, be sensitive to the power relations between herself and those with whom she researches and, being concerned with and challenged by the priorities and experience of the people researched, remain open to changing her research agenda (e.g., Gordon 1993; Schepers-Hughes 1992).

Elizabeth Enslin's (1994) critique takes this approach one step further. Like many others, she claims that political issues of social inequality and injustice have become institutionalized as merely textual dilemmas in much feminist and postmodern anthropology. In this way, they have become disconnected from the practical needs and lived realities of those researched. Conceived as political interventions, these radical textual strategies are ineffective, ultimately serving little more than careerist ends.⁵⁶ Accordingly, feminist ethnography risks betraying the very people it seeks to represent and empower (Visweswaran 1994). Enslin argues for a feminist praxis that privileges practices other than writing. These, whether advocacy, mediation, translation, or other forms of practical assistance, should, she claims, benefit the community studied.

In contemplating fieldwork I positioned myself in the “awkward” (M. Strathern 1987a) yet fertile conjunction between feminism and anthro-

pology (Caplan 1988b). Like Strathern (1987a, 1989b), I recognized that the subject matter, methods, and political aims of some feminist anthropological projects are at odds with an ethnographic agenda to identify, if not promote, difference between self and other, researcher and researched. Clearly, these potentially contradictory approaches create political, ethical, and epistemological dilemmas for the feminist anthropologist/ethnographer. However, unlike Strathern (1987a), and to some degree Stacey (1988), I believed it worthwhile to embrace the problematic and messy entanglements between feminist and anthropological knowledges and practices as way of allowing each to critique the other (Kirby 1989).⁵⁷ In short, I aimed to “engender anthropology with a feminist imagination” (Wheatley 1994). Believing myself engaged in a feminist ethnographic project, I, like Visweswaran, was mindful of the need to continually scrutinize and de-essentialize the terms and boundaries of feminist ethnography; to continually “rewrite the terms of ‘home’ and ‘world’ through a regenerated feminist praxis” (Visweswaran 1988, 112).

This work then is an attempt to foreground the relational embodied experiences of Nuakatan men and women—particularly women’s experience of pregnancy, birth, breast-feeding, menstruation, and death—as a way of reflecting on my own and other people’s ways of knowing and understanding notions of the self and person. But even more than this, it is an attempt to explore the often forgotten fact, reality, or truth—unpopular words in the postmodern, postcolonial milieu—that in spite of our differences we are all of women born, dependent, and in need of care. And, despite unresolvable questions about our mortality, we all face a certain death.



Nuakata, October 1993—A Conversation

Shelley: We need to begin packing, if we’re leaving the day after tomorrow.

Roger: We have to decide what we’re leaving behind.

Shelley: And whom we will give things to. We need to make a list so that we don’t forget anyone. [Pause] What about the Coleman lamp? Who shall we give that to? Everyone will want it.

Roger: Taubada Antiya. He’ll use it himself, but he will also take it along to community meetings and church celebrations. What about the trunk?

Shelley: I don't know. Who would want it? What would they do with it anyway? What would they store in it? No one has any books except their Bible and hymnbook and what else would they put in it. No one has enough things to fill it. I think we should take it back to Alotau and give it to Ken and Lisa and the boys. They can store equipment or toys or books in it.

Roger: Wycliffe and Washington and the others could keep using it as a card table.

Shelley: They won't use it as a card table. They'll just sit and play cards on their sleeping mats. They just did that for us, because they know *dimdims* [white people] have trouble sitting on the ground for a long time!

Roger: Don't you think we should leave it here? It's really solid and indestructible. I am sure someone would want it.

Shelley: I don't know. I am just not sure that it belongs here.

Roger: What do you mean?

Shelley: I don't know. We can leave everything else behind, but somehow leaving the trunk seems all wrong. It seems out of place.

Roger: I don't understand. [Pause] Do you want to take it back to Australia?

Shelley: What would we do with it? No, it doesn't belong there either.



My metaphorical trunk unpacked, the baggage I carried is now revealed; what follows is a testimony of experiences shared, of my witness to Nuakatan people's witnessing.