

*“What is required
is a new
framework that
invokes neither
Utopia nor
Arcadia, which
treats same-sex
desire as a
phenomenon in its
own right. . . .”*

**FROM ARCADIA
TO UTOPIA**
Manipulating Same-Sex
Desire in Ethnographic Texts

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Ethnographers complicit with the ideology of compulsory heterosexuality generally use two metanarratives to obviate the need to discuss same-sex desire from their texts. In the Utopian metanarrative, same-sex desire is simply absent from human interactions, while in the Arcadian, it is present everywhere, a simple part of the background that can be endlessly deferred. Classical, modern, and postmodern ethnographies of both Western and non-Western cultures are analyzed. It is suggested that future ethnographies might avoid the metanarratives to fully explore the fluidity and complexity of same-sex desire.

Ethnographers are usually eager to document the sex lives of their informants; after all, as Don Kulick (1995) tells us, "Sex has always been one of the gaudiest exhibits in the anthropological sideshow" (p. 3). However, their enthusiasm often falters when they observe romantic inclinations between people of the same gender¹; the epistemological constraints of compulsory heterosexuality (Warner 1993) mandate that sexual desire occur only between male and female bodies. When they write up their field notes, therefore, they must find some way to account for cultural objects, sexual behaviors, personal relationships, and life stories that seem to be interwoven through webs of homoerotic desire.² In this article, I will argue that two metanarratives work to eliminate homoerotic desire as an explanatory force, or even as an object of study. The first, *Utopian*, presumes that such desire plays no role whatever in human interaction, so any observed homoerotic behavior must result from heterosexual desire, ritualized, misplaced, frustrated, or rationalized. The second, *Arcadian*, presumes that same-sex desire infuses every human interaction; since it is everywhere, it is nowhere, and there is no need to discuss it at all. Most, though by no means all, ethnographic texts within the field of cultural anthropology and allied disciplines evoke the Utopian or the Arcadian metanarrative, or both.

While some ethnographers continue to present a fiction of empirical objectivity and Flaubertian omniscience, most concede that they have no absolute knowledge about what they are observing; they observe through lenses of their own presuppositions, political agendas, and internalized multiplicity of voices and create texts that evoke various preexisting journalistic, scientific, and fictional metanarratives. It is pointless to search for an empirical truth behind the text; as Foucault (1984) tells us, texts establish endless possibilities of signification, and it is our job to "imagine the general condition of each text, the

conditions of both the space in which it is dispersed and the time in which it unfolds” (p. 104). We read ethnography—and write it—not for “scientific” content, as if it were physics,³ but “for the literary” (Scott 1992, 36), for re-created life experience.

Although a distinctive form in itself, ethnographic writing participates in the various semantic and rhetorical structures common to literary texts (Van Maanen 1988; Atkinson 1990; Jacobson 1991). More precisely, ethnographic narratives are informed by *heteroglossia*⁴: they are dialogic interplays of many voices, including not only the author’s own ideas but bits of recalled conversations, fragments of old books, academic jargon, clichés of both language and thought, and overarching metanarratives, evoked by so many texts over so many years that they have become nearly part of common consciousness. Among these metanarratives are tales of the ancient, venerable societies of Utopia and Arcadia.

UTOPIA AND ARCADIA

The Utopian metanarrative locates, in the ethnographic object, the Enlightenment quest for order and moral control, recalling More’s *Utopia*, Campanella’s *Cita del Sole*, and novels such as Gilman’s *Herland* and Bellamy’s *Looking Backwards*.⁵ In the typical Utopian fiction, a European stumbles onto an isolated island, valley, or future earth ruled entirely by reason, and acts as Geertz’s (1988, 13) cartographer, describing gigantic dormitories in clockwork cities, workers happy and productive in state-assigned jobs, and sexual relations conducted solely to replenish the supply of workers.⁶

Ethnographies that evoke the Utopian metanarrative tend to construct the ethnographic field as a vast public sphere, a place of business where it would be indecorous to acknowledge the presence of desire, either between ethnographer and “native” or between the natives themselves. The texts may describe same-sex friendships as cool and polite, predicated on potential social or economic gain rather than on affection. They often fail to record homoerotic behavior at all, but those that they do record are framed as essentially heterosexual acts designed to foster kinship ties, make money, jump-start the reproductive system, practice for heterosexual marriage, or please the gods—for any number of

reasons, except that sometimes people find members of their own sex desirable.

The Arcadian metanarrative, conversely, locates, in the ethnographic object, the Romantic quest for escape from the self, recalling Sidney's *Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*, Montemayor's *Diana*, and novels such as Hudson's *Green Mansions* and Sand's *Indiana*.⁷ In the typical Arcadian fiction, a European stumbles onto an isolated island, valley, or mythic past world ruled by passion, and acts as Geertz's (1988, 13) pilgrim, embarking on a journey of self-discovery while incidentally describing life without clocks, trains, jobs, politics, or religion, villages of happy natives who spend their days plucking mangos from trees and deciding who they will invite into their bed tonight.⁸

Ethnographies that evoke the Arcadian metanarrative tend to construct the ethnographic field as a vast private sphere, "home" writ large, where desire is both proper and necessary, universally felt and universally acknowledged. The texts may describe same-sex friendships as passionate and intense, predicated on interpersonal attraction rather than on potential political or economic gain; an undertow of same-sex desire presumably infuses all individuals, groups, cultural artifacts, and social institutions. Homoerotic behavior may still go unobserved or unrecorded, but those incidents that appear in the texts are framed as ordinary, expected, and in fact universal, as features of the landscape rather than a result of any particular actor's decisions or desires.

METHODOLOGY

Aside from the texts with which I was already familiar, I developed a sample of fifty ethnographies based on interesting or frequently recurring works in the syllabi of anthropology courses, the suggested reading lists in recent cultural anthropology textbooks, and Web pages devoted to introductory anthropology. I made no systematic attempt to produce a random sample; however, I limited the selection to book-length studies of a single culture, subculture, or region (except for a few shorter articles that were particularly illustrative). Since sociology, political science, and other fields draw on their own slightly different narrative strategies, presumptions, and techniques, I attempted to use only texts produced within the general disciplinary boundaries of cultural anthropology.

After obtaining the sample of texts, I approached them with the same tools of literary analysis taught to thousands of undergraduates. I evaluated the content and especially the style of each passage that described homoerotic behavior or same-sex friendships; sentence structure, word choice, allusion, metaphor, symbol, and sound reflect the distinct metanarratives as much as the connotations of the words themselves. I evaluated the accounts of the behaviors or relationships (that is, explanations offered for them) for internal logic and coherence, and for semantic or stylistic devices that might reflect hesitation or evasion (an economic exchange depicted through metaphors of physicality, for instance). Finally, I located each passage within the context of the entire text's narrative structure (or "plot"), key relationships ("characters"), general style, the author's stated aims and objectives, the author's personal and professional life (insofar as it can be known), and the social, political, and cultural climate in which the text was produced.

CLASSIC ETHNOGRAPHIES

Early ethnographers, who strove to be impartial, transparent observers, seem particularly likely to evoke the Utopian metanarrative. The classic *Sexual Lives of Savages* by Malinowski (1929), for instance, tends to explain all sexual behavior, even that between women and men, as a rational pursuit of favorable social status. Homosocial friendships rarely receive more than momentary attention: men seem to require other men primarily as sounding boards for their heterosexual machinations. Homoerotic behavior, when it occurs, is a lamentable colonial intrusion, the result of "the white man's influence and his morality, stupidly misapplied where there is no place for it" (p. 472).

The text tells us nothing about the meanings that Melanesians attribute to their same-sex relationships but a great deal about how Malinowski (1929) has manipulated textual cues to re-create Melanesia as an Enlightenment Utopia, where homoerotic behavior might be caused by the misuse of reason but never by anything so elemental as desire.

In contrast, Margaret Mead's (1928) *Coming of Age in Samoa* became one of the most popular ethnographies ever written due to a great extent to its Arcadian metanarrative, to its "alluring portrayal of Samoa as a paradise of adolescent free love" (Freeman 1983, 227).

Being a good Freudian, Mead tries to praise “charming” homosocial friendships while denying or devaluing “perverted” homoerotic behavior. After describing frequent love affairs between girls and conceding that one such affair counted among “the really important friendships in the whole group” (Mead 1928, 146), Mead quickly notes that the girls were not “homosexual.” However, Mead (1928) goes on to praise the Samoans’ healthy attitude toward “very prevalent homosexual practices” (p. 148). By comparison, in the West,

The effects of chance childhood perversions, the fixation of attention on unusual erogenous zones . . . all the accidents of emotional development which in a civilization, recognizing only one narrow form of sex activity, result in unsatisfactory marriages, casual homosexuality, and prostitution, are here rendered harmless. (p. 149)

In other words, homoerotic behavior is very common in Samoa, but social tolerance ensures that “accidents of emotional development” do not occur, and therefore homoerotic behavior does not exist! We can make some stabs at parsing this rhetorical incoherence: Mead means that depersonalized homoerotic behavior, based on the general diffusion of same-sex desire through every social interaction, is quite common, but it rarely coalesces into any particular relationship; one desires physical contact but not a specific person, act, or relationship. Desire is everywhere, so it is nowhere; there are no homosexuals in Samoa.

MODERN ETHNOGRAPHIES

Prior to the 1980s, when the increasing visibility of gay and lesbian communities in the West brought sexual identity to the forefront of academic consciousness, many ethnographers accepted the ideology of universal heterosexuality so wholeheartedly that when they noticed homoerotic behavior in the observed culture, they felt compelled to explain it as somehow heterosexual. Gilbert Herdt (1981), for instance, has produced a number of well-received books concerning same-sex desire, practices, and institutions in Melanesia and elsewhere; in his earliest works, however, he often evoked a Utopian metanarrative that displaced or eliminated same-sex desire.⁹ In *Guardians of the Flute*, Herdt introduced the then-startling news that a culture might require its

preteen and teenage boys to pair off sexually for a period of years yet did not succeed in raising a generation of “homosexuals.”

Herd (1981) explains this apparent anomaly through the Sambia theory of human generation: briefly, immature testicles require a “primer” of mature semen to produce semen of their own, so “ritualized” fellatio is necessary to ensure fertility. Older men (fifteen- or sixteen-year-olds) conscript young boys (ten- or eleven-year-olds) into “secret homosexual activities” (p. 278), wherein the penis becomes a “forcible substitution” for the mother’s breast (p. 279). According to the text, the boys respond with terror, thinking that the fellatio causes disease, that they will become ceremonially unclean, or that their necks will break and they will die (p. 281).¹⁰ One has to attend to scattered footnotes to discover that some of the boys “[take] eagerly” to the fellatio, that they compete for favorable partners, and that some pairs continue to engage in “ritualized” activity long after the requisite entrance into puberty had been achieved. These notes are structurally and rhetorically separate from the main narrative, in which the purely mechanical ingestion of semen serves the purely rational goal of preparing the boys for heterosexual reproduction.

It appears that in this early work, Herd (1981) had not yet developed a vocabulary for describing the private, emotional, and irrational aspects of desire: homoerotic behavior had to be ritualized, implicitly public (though secret), and “about” nothing less dramatic than a magical substitution of male for female generative organs. Yet, Herd’s personal and political awareness that homoerotic behavior indeed often is based on desire for its own sake rather than sympathetic magic continually intrudes on the narrative, ultimately creating structural incoherence. “Slipping into a contradictory discourse of individualism, personalogic theorizing, and decontextualizing,” Michelle Fine (1994) states, “we inscribe the Other, strain to white out Self, and refuse to engage the contradictions that litter our texts” (p. 72).

In a series of books from approximately the same period, Tobias Schneebaum (1969), who abandoned his Western scholarly identity to “go native” in various exotic locations, uses an Arcadian narrative strategy to describe his first encounter with a group of Akarama men in Peru:

A cold tongue licked at my back and then came around to my hand and licked again. I unbuttoned the last of the buttons on my shirt and took it

off. I removed my trousers. Hands were all over me again, pulling hard at the hair on my chest, lifting my penis and whispering Ooooo, spreading the cheeks of my buttocks and hugging, always hugging me. They each had a turn at touching my whole body, and some came up and held their penises alongside mine, comparing them. My nipples ached from the pinching. (p. 68)

This passage is a curious admixture of the standard “gaining rapport” encounter of ethnographic texts and the frenzied body exploration more commonly found in pornography. One wonders if Schneebaum (1969) is simply meeting the Akarama or having sex with them, or if the two social events can really be distinguished (the overt sexuality of this and many other passages has caused Schneebaum’s works to be dismissed by “serious” anthropologists; cf. Roscoe 1996, 204). More subtly, the encounter with Akarama breaks down the binarisms of human (hugging)/animal (licking), individual/group, pleasure/pain. In Arcadia, all the easy and convenient binary categories seem to dissolve in a profusion of erotic energy.

Schneebaum (1988) documents same-sex desire everywhere he goes, in places where other ethnographers noted only ritualized homoeroticism, or nothing at all. In the Asmat province of New Guinea, he rejoices in the open sexual intimacy of two *mbai*, “bond friends . . . put together to strengthen clan ties” (p. 43), and wonders:

Why did I have to go out of my country, out of my culture, out of my family, to find the kind of assurance and companionship necessary to my inner peace? Why did no one tell me early on that I was not alone? (p. 43)

Arcadian narratives, searches for the self amid a profusion of desire, recall Boone’s (1995) analysis of early twentieth-century Europeans’ erotic vacations in the Middle East, where inner peace was accomplished “sometimes in puritanical asceticism and sublimation, sometimes in sadistic outbreaks of violence, and sometimes in swooning surrender to the desert’s harsh beauty” (p. 96). By displacing his personal awareness of homoerotic desire onto the Akarama, Schneebaum (1988) creates a narrative in which desire informs every action, every relationship, and every social institution. In the end, however, he obviates the need to discuss such desire as a social phenomenon in its own right; it is simply part of the landscape.

ETHNOGRAPHIES OF THE WEST

The two metanarratives are not distinguished by the mention (or lack of mention) of specific homoerotic practices, by comparative literary quality or richness of detail, or by overall positive or negative evaluation of the recreated culture: Utopias need not be pleasant, merely rational, and Arcadia is often cruel. Phillippe Bourgois is a gifted writer and an astute social scientist, for instance, but his accounts of crack dealers and addicts in New York City frequently depend on a Utopian elimination of same-sex desire.

In "Just Another Night in a Shooting Gallery," Bourgois (1998) observes a crack house, a primarily male preserve where homosocial friendships might be expected to thrive but, in this case, rather emphatically do not. Doc, the proprietor, lives with Pops, a veteran addict, but we constantly wonder what keeps them together? Bourgois suggests, as an afterthought, that Pops runs errands in exchange for free samples of cocaine or heroine, but he offers no evidence to support this theory (the only time Pops "makes himself useful," he assists another addict, not Doc). The possibility that the two might be attracted to each other, might "desire" each other even on the elemental level of friendship, is never even considered.

A moment of something like homosocial bonding occurs when two male crack house patrons, Slim and Flex, get high on speedballs (heroin-cocaine mixtures):

Like polar valences attracting one another, the complementing tides of their respectively out of synch speedball highs welded the two men into animated conversation. They were unabashedly expressing mutual fraternal bliss. Oblivious to their surroundings, skidding in and out of contradictory tides of chemical exaltation, they were happy to be alive; proud of themselves; and invigorated by the sudden friendship that narcotics are capable of constructing and destructing in the wink of an eye. (Bourgois 1998, 51)

Observers of other sorts of disinhibited behavior might suspect that the drug high is simply allowing the two men to express their preexisting affection, the text, but Bourgois rejects this theory, stating that the drug high has actually "created" the friendship. Like previous ethnographies that explain homoerotic behavior as false, heterosexual

desire gone awry, the “fraternal bliss” here is false, chemically induced. Indeed, Bourgois implies that even the hint of homosocial attraction unnerves the entire group of crack addicts: Doc moves to another corner of the house, separating himself from the deviant pair; Slim, infantilized, becomes “an earnest child performing [a] sleep ritual” before lapsing into unconsciousness; Flex literally flexes his muscles, breaking up the place for firewood; and Bourgois suddenly, inexplicably, thinks about homosexual rape in prison (p. 57). In Utopia, the possibility of same-sex desire is introduced only so that it can be emphatically denied.

Loic Wacquant’s (1995a, 1995b) accounts of his participant observations in the world of professional and semiprofessional boxers similarly fail to describe homoerotic acts (which given the homophobic environment of the sport, are probably minimal to begin with); nevertheless, they tend to use the Arcadian more than the Utopian metanarrative, constantly eroticizing relationships, artifacts, and institutions. On entering the gym, Wacquant notes (1995b),

You cannot but be struck by the sight and sound of bodies everywhere and enraptured by the strange, ballet-like spectacle they offer, gliding across the ring, colliding and clinching, feet squealing on the thick blue mat or moving back and forth in measured steps in front of a mirror, shadow-boxing in pursuit of an invisible opponent . . . the washboard abdominals, chiseled torsos and cut-up quadriceps, sculptured backs, tight behinds and thighs, and the grimacing faces glistening with sweat. (p. 66)

The metaphor of the ballet, an art that is informed by a homosocial sublimation of same-sex desire, is disrupted by various evocations of male physicality; are we observing a performance, a workout, or an erotic movie? There is certainly a homoerotic element in pugilism, a repression/presentation of erotic energy aimed at members of one’s own sex. As Wacquant (1995a) tells us,

Boxers . . . borrow from the lexicon of romantic love to express the fondness and reverence they hold for the Sweet Science, speaking of the latter as one would of a difficult but sultry lover, or, better yet, a voluptuous and feisty mistress, ever covetous and trying but whose magnetism cannot be forsaken or evaded. (p. 509)

Other, more rational reasons for entering the sport are discussed, but they are rationalizations, never entirely believed by either Wacquant or the boxers. In the end, the men enter the Sweet Science as a quest after the supreme lover, who, because he is also male, has the power to both complete and destroy:

The boxer's passion is . . . torn asunder by the inescapable contradiction around which the pugilistic planet revolves, and which is but one avatar of the contradiction constitutive of all worldly provings of masculinity, namely the demand that fighters erode, nay ruin, that which it teaches them to value above all else to the point of sacralization: the violent male body, their own and that of their likenesses. (p. 522)

In spite of his scholarly rigor, and in spite of his careful excision of his own desire from the account, Wacquant has evoked an Arcadian metanarrative that reads like a journey of self-discovery yet endlessly defers the final revelation of self. The gym, like Milton's Paradise, is always threatened and ultimately doomed by the very desire that allows it to flourish.

POSTCOLONIAL ETHNOGRAPHIES

Scholars and political leaders outside the West often typify same-sex desire as a colonial intrusion, one of the techniques whereby "the Orient" was symbolically eroticized, and in the process, native bodies were regulated and destroyed.¹¹ Working in a postcolonial world, ethnographers often depend to a great extent on the Utopian metanarrative, dismissing evidence of same-sex desire in their informants as equivalent to a taste for MTV or McDonald's, as an inauthentic and somehow unnatural accommodation to Western hegemony.

Marjorie Shostak (1981) anticipates the intertextuality and multivocality of the postmodern ethnography by devoting large portions of her 1981 text to the first-person recollections of her informant, a !Kung woman named Nisa. Yet, the Utopian deferral of same-sex desire is frequently evident. In "her own words," Nisa tells us:

When I was still small, the work between a man and a woman, the work of living and lying down together, the work the adults took care of and

enjoyed, like dancing, the work of a man lying on top of a woman, of rising and falling and rising and falling over her, that work I didn't understand. . . . I thought "When people do that, is the woman being killed? Perhaps something terrible is happening." (pp. 112-13)

Nisa finds same-sex relations no less terrible; they will "cause the genitals to smell" or "ruin the genitals" (Shostak 1981, 115). She does engage in sexual play with her female friends but, according to the text, only to escape from incessant heterosexual wooing (one wonders why homoerotic behavior accomplishes this more effectively than simply avoiding the boys). Finally, a boy enlightens Nisa through the traditional Western equation (rather discordant here) of maturity and heterosexual coitus, and she joyfully accepts her heterosexual destiny.

It is important to realize that the text does not actually contain Nisa's words, but her words as interpreted, translated, edited, and put into a narrative framework that more often than not replicates the constraints of Western compulsory heterosexuality. Nisa may or may not have felt same-sex desire; Shostak (1981) does not think so, because she cannot believe that same-sex desire exists. In her introduction, she tells us that we will hear about Nisa's "childhood; her homosexual loves, her initial refusal of sex with boys, the boyfriend she loved who taught her to play 'house', and her eventual enjoyment of sex" (p. 31). In the structural logic of this sentence, "homosexual loves" are linked with "refusal of sex with boys"; that is, they are a mistake, heterosexual desires enacted on the wrong objects. It takes a heterosexual intervention to make Nisa aware of the instrumental necessity ("playing house") and physiological superiority ("enjoyment") of "sex with boys."

GAY, LESBIAN, AND QUEER ETHNOGRAPHIES

Ethnographers who choose communities of gay men or lesbians as their field of observation,¹² or who are themselves gay or lesbian, are not immune to the Utopian metanarrative that dislodges desire from behavior. As Will Roscoe (1996) notes, "The naming and unleashing of [same-sex] desire in discourse remains socially explosive" (p. 204): no anthropological study of same-sex behavior, identities, or institutions has ever received institutional funding (Williams 1996) or resulted in a

tenured position in an anthropology department (William O. Murray, personal correspondence, spring 1998). In such a repressive academic environment, eliminating same-sex desire from one's ethnographic text, evoking homoerotic behavior only when it means something rational (and thus, presumably, comprehensible to heterosexuals), may be a necessary career move.

Esther Newton's (1993) award-winning *Cherry Grove, Fire Island* documents sixty years in the life of a Long Island resort community that is home mainly to gay men and lesbians. Although she describes homoerotic behavior in some detail, Newton is careful to frame it through a Utopian metanarrative that endlessly defers or eliminates desire. A woman who frequented Fire Island in the 1960s tells us, "It was the whole romantic feeling of taking a boat and going to an island . . . and the whole romance of being, you know, in a gay community, being totally free, being ok . . . and we all fell in love with it" (p. 223). They fell in love with the island, with being free, but not—at least not obviously—with each other.

When she moves on to the hedonistic seventies, Newton (1993) becomes even more circumspect. Discussing summers informed by orgiastic encounters on the beach and in nightclubs, an informant states, "My first motivation was . . . sex. There's no question about that. But more important than physical pleasure itself was *the idea*" (p. 184; emphasis added). Not the idea of sex, however. Newton elaborates:

Sexuality stripped of social condition can foster *communitas*, the diffuse but powerful feeling of group solidarity transcending the usual social divides . . . group sex at the Rack [a nightclub], whatever else it was, was a powerful factor in the creation of gay nationalism. (p. 184)

Newton (1993) here diffuses same-sex desire into the vague, dissimulating "whatever else it was," in effect substituting clipboards and committees for Crisco and poppers. The transformation is startling: on Fire Island in the seventies, same-sex desire was celebrated more overtly than probably anywhere in the United States, before or after, with few thoughts of kinship networks, health dangers, social respectability, or true love, yet Newton evokes not desire but a frenzy of grass-roots organizing; as in most Utopian narratives, the sex means something else, in this case political solidarity.

Of course, gay- and lesbian-identified ethnographers are perfectly capable of using the Arcadian metanarrative as well, evoking a diffuse,

undifferentiated web of same-sex desire in the cultures they observe. For instance, Badruddin Khan (1997) contends that Pakistan is (or was) a paradise of universal same-sex desire where one was constantly being drawn into idyllic homoerotic encounters. One of his informants states,

I currently live in Karachi, and I have sex almost every day. There is no shortage of men available for sex! It is usually possible to go to a crowded place and pick someone up. Usually one look is enough. . . . If you pick a young guy who is obviously horny, there is never any problem. (p. 286)

All Pakistani men are available for sex with anyone at any time; if you have a free half hour, just get on a crowded bus and grab. Khan contends that unfortunately, the Western homosexual/heterosexual binarism, which insists that people experience same-sex or opposite-sex desire, never both, is forcing men who would otherwise be having constant joyous orgasms to deny their inclinations, lest they betray their social obligation to marry and produce children. As in the world of Wacquant's boxers, Paradise is always threatened, and usually lost.

THE IMPACT OF THE METANARRATIVES ON FIELDWORK

The decision to invoke one or the other, or both of these metanarratives often reflects the ethnographer's authorial self-consciousness. Andrew Killick (1995) locates in the narrative structure of the fieldwork experience a sexual metaphor that posits a necessarily male, heterosexual ethnographer who penetrates "feminized, other space" (p. 102). I contend that both metanarratives specify a gendered and heterosexualized metaphor in which the ethnographic object is a feminine sexual partner typified as either virgin or whore. In Utopia, the putatively male and heterosexual ethnographer risks disrupting/perverting the innocence of the field; in Arcadia, he risks being disrupted/perverted by the savage profligacy of the field.

Newton (1993) further maintains that the metaphor of heterosexual penetration leading to self-knowledge, Ricouer's "comprehension of the self by the detour of the other," would be disrupted if the ethnographer's individual desire were ever concretized in the text (p. 218); thus, graduate students entering the field for the first time traditionally strive

for a monklike nonsexual existence, while seasoned researchers simply omit their liaisons from their field notes (Whitehead and Conaway 1986).

In the Utopian metanarrative, ethnographers who own up to sexual experiences often confess pangs of guilt, worrying that "sleeping with the natives" is a colonial intrusion, in the words of Joseph A. Boone (1995), "a series of collisions between traditionally assumed Western sexual categories . . . and equally stereotyped colonialist tropes" (p. 91). By lacking sufficient self-control and saltpeter, they maintain, they have participated in a vast conspiracy aimed at eroticizing, regulating, and inevitably destroying the Other. In the Arcadian metanarrative, reflexive ethnographers are likely to resist the presence of what they perceive as undirected or misdirected desire and attempt to impose their own hierarchies of categories and practices, sometimes with the zeal of a nineteenth-century missionary stamping out sodomy. For instance, Evelyn Blackwood (1995) is repelled by her Indonesian lover's claim to be a man in a woman's body, which renders their relationship heterosexual; she attempts, albeit unsuccessfully and with numerous misgivings, to enlighten her lover with the "true" explanation that some women (who are "really" women) desire other women.

THE IMPACT OF THE METANARRATIVES ON KNOWLEDGE

It is now a commonplace that ethnographic writing participates in fictive literary discourse, that it has more in common with novels than treatises in advanced mathematics (Caplan 1988). Why should it disturb us, then, that one of the most subtle, complex, and ultimately irrational of social phenomena, erotic or eroticized same-sex desire, often is situated, organized, and clarified through the replication of somewhat simplistic metanarratives?

First, the metanarratives promote the ethnocentric ideology that the construction, negotiation, and politicization of same-sex desire occurs only in the West, that elsewhere desire is unproblematic, present everywhere or not present at all. While it may be true that some identities based on same-sex desire are peculiarly dependent on industrialization, modernization, and capitalism, and thus were "invented," as Foucault (1976) tells us, by nineteenth-century confessors and sexologists, every

culture produces its own sexual hegemonies, with its own undercurrents of subversion, transgression, and dissent. "More often than we usually care to think," Rosaldo (1989) states, "our everyday lives are crisscrossed by border zones, pockets, and eruptions of all kinds" (pp. 207-8). Certainly, the West has been informed by various varieties of hegemonic heterosexuality and various undercurrents of homoerotic and other sexuality; why should the Bororo or Fulani be so different, even if ethnographers are told, "We have no homosexuals here"? Fieldwork should ideally document, in the words of Comaroff and Comaroff (1992), "the logic of practice, not a set of ascriptive norms" (p. 22).

Also, Utopia and Arcadia logically cohere only if we presume a hermetically sealed culture, one in which same-sex desire can be entirely present or entirely absent, without recourse to the situation in the culture next door. However, anthropologists have increasingly realized that cultures are never discrete, self-contained systems. Even if it were possible to locate pristine models of same-sex desire in some theoretical period "before first contact," the field today is necessarily awash in uneasy negotiations of traditional, Western, and syncretic articulations that render simplistic assessments of "entirely present" or "entirely absent" useless.

THE IMPACT OF THE METANARRATIVES ON CULTURE

As has become quite obvious after three decades of postmodernism, various types of oppression based on gender, class, race, or sexuality generate epistemic privilege (Haraway 1988). Webs of meaning, the winks and gestures of "thick description," must necessarily be realigned, resituated, and misread. Specific observations of enacted or expressed same-sex desire may be ignored, dismissed as anomalous, or transmuted into generality. Vincent (1991) tells us that knowledge can only be produced in a political and social context, the academic *habitus*: by displacing and exoticizing same-sex desire, by presenting a West in which hegemonic heterosexuality is neither questioned nor transgressed, these metanarratives contribute to the systematic exclusion of same-sex desire and marginalization of gay and lesbian persons, both inside and outside the academy (Roscoe 1995).

Perhaps more critically, the metanarratives have a profound effect on the field itself. According to Said (1978), the West did not merely interpret the Orient but acted “as a genuine creator, whose life-giving power represents, animates, constitutes the otherwise silent and dangerous space beyond familiar boundaries” (p. 57). Similarly, ethnographers construct not only narratives but cultures: as Roscoe (1996) notes, merely by asking questions, merely by juxtaposing “western” and “native” selves, ethnographers open a space for changes in self-understanding that have profound social, cultural, and even political implications. Anthropologists report that homophobia is increasing at an alarming rate worldwide, that villages where one could announce same-sex interests to informants and receive a reaction of sheer indifference (or a dinner date) are becoming decidedly rare (Williams 1996). While, as Comaroff and Comaroff (1992) state, Western ideologies are “variously and ingeniously redeployed to bear a host of new meanings as non-Western peoples . . . [fashion] their own visions of modernity” (p. 5), the two metanarratives leave very little room for redeployment: both the absence and the ubiquity of same-sex desire can evoke political agendas that criminalize “Western homosexual perversion.”

CONCLUSION

The most-often proposed way to avoid the metanarratives, and other epistemological and ideological constraints on ethnographic knowledge, is mere reflexivity, or in Kulick's (1995) critique, “the tendency . . . to think that problems of power, privilege and perspective can be defused simply by inserting the self into one's accounts and proclaiming that dialogue has occurred” (p. 15). Roscoe (1996), for instance, suggests that the ethnographer functions best by “openly embracing the role of an ethnical culture-bearer and inaugurating contact by proposing a cultural exchange” (p. 208). The “cultural exchange” methodology would require us to abandon the notion of an ontological self-other dichotomy or even, as bell hooks suggests, to give up attempting to “know” the informants (to discover “what it's like” to be black, gay, or Zulu), to approach not informants, but coconspirators in the constant evocation and negotiation of ideologies, myths, received wisdom, attractions, motives, and beliefs that make up culture.

Even if ethnographers become “cultural ambassadors,” however, they still will need to observe, transcribe, organize, and write the text, and ultimately “create” the culture for the audience back home; during any of these processes, political concerns or sheer heterosexism may force the most impartial observer to ignore or neglect same-sex desire. What is required is a new framework that invokes neither Utopia nor Arcadia, which treats same-sex desire as a phenomenon in its own right, present to varying degrees in many but not all bodies, interactions, sexual practices, identities, and institutions.

Some ethnographers have recently attempted to produce texts that recognize the dynamic and fluid quality of desire. Teunis (1996), analyzing men who have sex with men in Dakar, acknowledges that there is an economic component to many of the liaisons:

When two men have sex, the one who acts as inserter . . . pays money or gives gifts to the other. Gifts are a sign of an ongoing relationship, whereas money usually indicates a one-night sexual encounter. Receiving the money is . . . not the intention of one of the partners, so the interaction is not defined as “prostitution.” (p. 161)

Instead of simply stating that the homoerotic behavior is “about” money, Teunis (1996) asserts that the sexual behavior of the *yauss* and *oubli* (homosexual men) derives from a complex interplay of both personal desire and “the cultural space in which they attempt to express their desires” (p. 169). They are bound together by desire, certainly, but also to varying degrees by friendship, kinship, social status, economic exploitation, and fear of exposure in an oppressive society. Teunis evokes “the bed” where men express their desires, even as he concludes that “sexuality . . . does not organize the sexual subculture in Dakar, Sengal” (p. 169).

More recently, Parker (1999) describes same-sex desire in contemporary urban Brazil as one strand of “an increasingly intricate weave of intersubjective cultural frames” (p. 54) that combines traditional gender-stratified models of homoerotic interaction with an evolving “gay” consciousness in complex and striking ways. Similarly, Laurie Essig’s (1999) part-ethnographic, part-political study of contemporary Russia displays a commitment to describing same-sex desire as neither entirely present nor entirely absent, but an integral part of some—not all—behaviors, cultural objects, identities, institutions, and even city topographies.

The existing metanarratives cannot be maintained without misinterpreting, often violently, the culture being recreated. Trouillot (1991) bemoans “the vacuum created by the fall of the house of reason in the once fertile fields of Utopian imagination, and the empirical destruction of the savage-object” (p. 36): just as they cannot in good conscience accede to the myth of epistemic impartiality or the civilized/savage binarism, future ethnographers cannot afford to either ignore or lose themselves in evocations of desire. They must become aware that desire is neither entirely absent nor entirely present in any social interaction, but both present and absent simultaneously, an undertow that percolates through but is never entirely contained by individuals, practices (even sexual practices), and institutions.

NOTES

1. This is between people whom the ethnographer assumes to belong to the same gender. In lived experience, gender categories differ considerably between cultures and are often remarkably fluid within cultures.

2. Sigmund Freud (1994) and Herbert Marcuse (1974) have discussed desire as a simple erotic attraction between radical Others, which civilization must repress or celebrate. More sophisticated accounts of the relationship between desire and being can be found in Levinas (1987) and Girard (1965). I am especially indebted to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s model of desire as a web of association in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1987).

3. Physics texts, of course, contain their own metanarratives, their own presumptions and constraints.

4. Mikhail Bakhtin uses the term most famously in *Rabelais and his World* (1984) and in *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981).

5. The most important general works on Utopian fiction are those of Elliot (1970), Manuel and Manuel (1979), Ruppert (1986), Bartkowski (1989), Levitas (1990), Boesky (1996a), Donnelly (1998), and Ferns (1999).

6. On the regulation of desire in Utopian societies, see Peyser (1992), Boesky (1996b), and Parrinder (1997).

7. I am using Arcadia to maintain the contrast with Utopia, as the destination of a geographic journey; the proper term for the literary mode is “pastoral.” See Levin (1969), Rosenmeyer (1969), Poggioli (1975), Empson (1992), and Haber (1994).

8. On desire and the threat to identity in pastoral fiction, see Sinfield (1985), Kinney (1991), and Olmsted (1996).

9. I do not mean to imply that Professor Herdt (1981) maintains a fiction of displaced or absent homoerotic desire in all of his works; in fact, he is one of the most sophisticated and stimulating scholars in the field, and he has theorized about desire

frequently. I mean only that the Utopian metanarrative is evident in some specific texts produced early in his career.

10. One need not wonder why they would be so concerned with a custom they believe to be natural and inevitable; every child knows that things designed to "make you big and strong" may well be distinctly unpleasant. The emphasis on distrust and terror does seem exaggerated, however.

11. For instance, see Seabrook (1994), Rinaldi (1998), and Abu-Khalil (1997). A useful theoretical exposition is Goldie (1999).

12. Within the past few years, there has been an explosion of interest in queer identities outside the West. Among the most important book-length studies are those of Carrier (1995), Jackson (1995), Kulick (1998), Prieur (1998), Summerhawk (1998), Green (1999), Seabrook (1999), and Walzer (2000). Strangely, although historical, political, biographical, and literary studies of Western gay, lesbian, and queer communities abound, few are ethnographic; among the most interesting texts that use ethnographic narrative structures to some extent are Hawkeswood (1996), Buring (1997), Alpert (1997), and Nardi (1999).

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