Description of Research Strategies

The question of aerial photography as anthropological method first presented itself to me in the pages of historian James Clifford’s *The Predicament of Culture* (1988). I was intrigued by Clifford’s discussion of Marcel Griaule, a founding figure in French anthropology and the first cultural anthropologist known to use aerial photography in field research. Clifford develops a critique of the visual bias in Griaule’s early scholarship, linking it to the dominating gaze of colonialism. But I wondered if there might not be more to the story, and so I set out to trace the use of aerial photography in anthropology from Griaule to the present. The research for this project was conducted at three institutional scales, reflecting the iterative nature of the research process and the undiminished importance of the serendipitous find.

I began my research with the resources of Fondren Library, reading background material like Christopher Pinney’s *Photography and Anthropology* (2011). A search in OneSearch using the key words “aerial,” “photography,” and “anthropology” led me to the Evon Vogt volume, which I discuss in the second section of the essay. I placed interlibrary loan requests for Griaule publications that were not part of Fondren’s collection, including the methods handbook that he compiled for his students at the Sorbonne. Much of Griaule’s work remains untranslated, and so I translated passages that were relevant to this project from French into English, working with a native French speaker to corroborate the translations. Of course, Fondren’s electronic journal subscriptions also helped me to find secondary sources to contextualize my primary research, including the Paula Amad article from *History of Photography* with which the essay opens.
My previous experience as a community college librarian had introduced me to the work of Terry Evans, an art photographer known for her use of aerial views. I had hoped to incorporate Evans’ work into the essay, but the only book of hers in Fondren’s collection, *Disarming the Prairie* (1998a), left me stumped: the photographs were haunting, but I couldn’t see how to connect them to the rest of the project. However, I started clicking around Evans’ website, and was floored to learn that her first book, *Prairie: Images of Ground and Sky* (1986), included an introductory essay by the anthropologist Gregory Bateson. Now, this was a find! With only days to go before the paper was due, though, I knew there wasn’t enough time to request the book through interlibrary loan. Google Books was no help; no preview available. Happily, I had the presence of mind to search WorldCat, where I discovered that the Hirsch Library at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston had a copy in their noncirculating collection. I spent most of an afternoon in the library’s sunlit reading room, poring over the photographs and developing the arguments I make in the third section of the essay. As a Rice student, I naturally look to Fondren to meet most of my research needs, but this experience was a valuable reminder that there are other research collections in the city of Houston that are at my disposal.

The connection between Evans and Bateson took the essay in a new direction, but my original questions about Griaule remained unanswered. The primary sources I consulted helped me to understand how aerial photography had allowed Griaule to perceive the sacred geometry of Dogon gardens. But by no means did these sources disconfirm James Clifford’s colonialist hypothesis. Searching for something that I might have missed, I scanned through a 1956 bibliography of Griaule’s work and saw a curiously titled piece from early in his career: *Mauvais oeil*, or Evil eye. The article appeared in a short-lived periodical known as *Documents*, which was published in Paris from 1929 to 1930. The editor was none other than Georges Bataille.
To my delight, the Bibliothèque Nationale de France had digitized the entire print run of the magazine, and I was able to access Griaule’s article for free through their digital library, Gallica. *Mauvais oeil*, which did not appear in Clifford’s otherwise extensive Griaule bibliography, complicated the reading advanced in *The Predicament of Culture*. If James Clifford’s Griaule harbored “a somewhat disturbing fantasy of observational power” (1988: 69), the Griaule of *Documents* was more ambivalent about vision: “To look at an object with desire is to appropriate it, to take pleasure in it. To desire is to sully; to desire is to take” (1929: 218). In my essay, I argue that these are not the words of an unmitigated colonialist and scopophile. Finding the article in *Documents* allowed me to shed new light on a key figure in mid-century anthropology, challenging established claims with fresh evidence gleaned through online research.

I am currently in the process of revising and extending this essay, which will become one of the three major papers that are part of my candidacy requirements as a graduate student in the Department of Anthropology. I particularly want to flesh out the section at the end of the essay, in which I propose the taxonomy of images of conscience, connectivity, and configuration. An indictment has been handed down in connection with the Dallas meatpacking plant mentioned in this section, and the revised version of the essay will include a more extensive discussion of the court case. The existing account of connectivity will also be enriched by a discussion of HyperCities, a digital humanities project based on Google Maps. Including an analysis of HyperCities will allow me to address what I see as one fault of the essay, its neglect of non-photographic aerial imaging. This fault aside, I believe that the essay demonstrates an imaginative use of library tools and resources and a willingness to look in unconventional places for the answers to research questions. Thank you for considering the essay as a contender for the 2013 Friends of Fondren Graduate Research Award.