

6-21-2011

## Mikhail Bakhtin: The Philosopher of Human Communication

Gary Kim

*The University of Western Ontario*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/totem>



Part of the [Linguistic Anthropology Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Kim, Gary (2004) "Mikhail Bakhtin: The Philosopher of Human Communication," *Totem: The University of Western Ontario Journal of Anthropology*: Vol. 12: Iss. 1, Article 8.

Available at: <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/totem/vol12/iss1/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarship@Western. It has been accepted for inclusion in Totem: The University of Western Ontario Journal of Anthropology by an authorized administrator of Scholarship@Western. For more information, please contact [kmarshal@uwo.ca](mailto:kmarshal@uwo.ca).

---

# Mikhail Bakhtin: The Philosopher of Human Communication

## Keywords

Mikhail Bakhtin, philosophy, literature, language, human communication, art

## Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).

## **Mikhail Bakhtin: The Philosopher of Human Communication**

Gary Kim

### **Introduction**

The work of Russian theorist Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin has emerged from general obscurity to currently reign as some of the most influential philosophical theory of the twentieth century. In the past, much of his research was obscured by a number of factors. For example, the Soviet government exiled Bakhtin to the central Asian nation of Kazakhstan from 1930 to 1936

TOTEM vol 12 2003-2004

Copyright © 2004 TOTEM: The UWQ Journal of Anthropology

because they were convinced that the scholar had personal connections to the underground Russian Orthodox Church (Bakhtin 1981: xxiv). The only copy of his manuscript on his theories about eighteenth-century German literature was destroyed during the Nazi invasion of World War Two (Bakhtin 1981: xxiv). Furthermore, his doctoral dissertation on French writer Francois Rabelais was failed by the Gor'kij Institute of World Literature in 1940 due to its heavy emphasis on sex and bodily functions. As a result, Bakhtin and his work faded into obscurity until his work was rediscovered by Russian literary students nearly a quarter of a century later (Bakhtin 1981: xxv and Danow 1991: 4). It is also rumoured that Bakhtin had published some of his work under the names of his compatriots and colleagues, V.N. Voloshinov and P.N. Medvedev (Danow 1991: 5-6).

The majority of Bakhtin's theories critically examine literature such as those written by Francois Rabelais and Russian novelist, Fyodor Dostoevsky (Bakhtin 1981: xxxi). He also concentrates heavily on language and its general use not only between people during communicative interaction, but also between writers and their literary 'subjects' (Danow 1991: 3-4). His 'failed' doctoral dissertation, *Rabelais and His World* focuses on the human experiences of joyous festivities during the French carnival of the Middle Ages as depicted in the literature of Francois Rabelais (Bakhtin 1984: xviii). Throughout his work, Bakhtin consistently theorizes that everything considered to be a work of 'art,' such as literature, orients itself to multi-layered expression and communication towards its audience (1984: viii). His ideas of art as a vehicle oriented towards interaction with its audience in order to express or communicate any sort of intention is reminiscent of Clifford Geertz's theories of culture. Geertz loosely argues that culture is a socially shared code of meaning created through the interactive actions of individuals and can consequently be generally interpreted like a literary text through its symbols (McGee and Warms 2000: 503-516). Therefore, culture as Geertz and Bakhtin allude to can be generally transmitted through communication or reciprocal interaction such as a dialogue. As a result, Bakhtin is frequently referred to as the "philosopher of human communication" (Danow 1991: 3-4).

Both Bakhtin and Geertz would argue that communication is a highly abstract and complicated concept which inhabits every aspect of daily life for

each and every individual since interaction with one another strongly affects our interpersonal relationships. In this respect, theories of human communication through verbal dialogue or literary representations will apply to virtually every academic discipline in the human sciences. I personally place heavy emphasis on communication and its association with anthropology, an academic discipline which can be loosely defined as the philosophical pondering of human experience and its meaning under a specific set of cultural and historical circumstances. Furthermore, anthropological research is often carried out through physical interaction between individuals which is represented through a literary vehicle known as an 'ethnography'. In doing so, anthropology also promotes a philosophy or 'way of life' that emphasizes mutual interaction with individuals without creating social boundaries, thus separating the anthropologist from the cultural "other" (Darnell 2001: 141). Additionally, the entire world can be viewed as *polyglossic* or multi-voiced since every individual possesses their own unique world view which must taken into consideration through dialogical interaction (Bakhtin 1981: 12).

Anthropology is often faced with much criticism for its colonial roots and legitimizing highly ethnocentric concepts through its published literature, such as "primitive" in terms of categorizing individuals from different cultures and societies (Darnell 2001: 140). Most anthropologists from the past have unfortunately focussed solely on the bizarre, unfamiliar, and the exotic in foreign cultures and thus, have created a demeaning dichotomy of the privileged anthropologist studying the "primitive other" in its ethnographic representation (Geertz 1981: 12). Bakhtin's theories on the novel as a dialogue between the author and subject, and the use of language between individuals should compel anthropologists to critically examine their past history and improve literary representations of different cultures by analysing past ethnographies. In doing so, anthropologists can also develop ideas concerning effective communication and interaction between individuals or more specifically, 'subject' and 'object' in mutual and reciprocal terms (Darnell 2001: 142). Furthermore, these philosophical ideas can be applied to ethnographic encounters, as well as during common or routine activities of our daily lives.

Effective communication is perhaps the key

to understanding different cultures, its individuals, and their world views. Bakhtin argues that communication based on dialogue or *dialogism* is a multi-layered process that constantly unfolds throughout time and possesses virtually no generic characteristics (1981: 7-8). I would argue that anthropology is an academic vehicle which attempts to critically examine the outcome of such interaction between individuals and to capture it through the differential interpretive vision of each and every anthropological ethnographer. In this respect, Bakhtin's theories on communicative, mutual, and dialogical interaction are greatly analogous to the ideals and aims in the discipline of anthropology which is constantly changing, evolving, and unfolding as it strives to self-reflexively ponder and reflect upon the ideas of communication, interaction, and its literary representations. In doing so, individuals who choose to read the literature of anthropologists can perhaps attain an understanding of not only the world view of another individual, but of the ethnographer and also oneself.

### Multi-Vocality and Multi-Culturalism

One of Bakhtin's most important concepts is his theory of *heteroglossia* which can be generally defined as the co-existence of numerous voices (*polyglossia*) or socio-ideological contradictions that intersect and interanimate one another in a single language (Bakhtin 1981: 291-292). Each socio-ideological standpoint is indicative of a world view with its own objects, meanings, values, and has the potential to interact with differing ideologies (Bakhtin 1981: 291). In this respect, if the interaction between each world view is mutual and reciprocal, these different world views will eventually condition one another, a process which produces change through creative elaboration by ways of new and differing meanings. However, 'multiple meanings' and perspectives produced from communicative interaction can only occur if each random utterance is un-finalized or *centrifugal* and willing to accommodate one another (Bakhtin 1981: 271-272, 282). Each and every utterance possesses an intention entangled with values, thoughts, ideas, and points of view directed towards its object, conditioning a response which is to be taken into consideration through open-ended dispute (Bakhtin 1981: 276-277). More importantly, heteroglossia or 'multiple meanings' can be otherwise stated as the

creative elaboration as a result of dialogical interaction between differing world views and voices.

Each and every culture is composed of different individuals, each possessing their own unique world view. However, it is quite common to find that not every utterance or world view is taken into consideration and as a result, is silenced into a marginal social status. For example, Fighting For Faith and Nation by Cynthia Keppley Mahmood is an ethnography which critically examines Sikh militants who have resorted to violent methods in reaction to the 'oppression' of the Hindu-dominated government in India. In the ethnography, Mahmood discusses "Operation Blue Star," a government-led plan to attack a holy Sikh site known as the Golden Temple which left thousands of Sikh civilians dead (Mahmood 1996: 71 and 94). Some Sikhs claim that the Hindu-dominated government is attempting to absorb Sikhism into the larger tradition of Hinduism (Mahmood 1996: 113). In this particular situation, personal interpretations of voices or world views being taken into accommodative interaction, or lack thereof, can provide intimate glimpses into social relations between cultural or religious groups in a multi-cultural nation such as India. By providing her views on such matters, Mahmood communicates her own dialogic interactions with the voices of Sikh militants in hope that readers attain a partial understanding of their beliefs and actions. Bakhtin would argue that Mahmood provides readers with a biographical novel which expresses images consisting of genuine human individuals rather than 'stick figures' who exist in another time and space other than our own (1981: 130).

Ethnographies such as Fighting For Faith and Nation not only promote greater understanding and empathy for readers from a western audience, but also for readers from the opposing side of the 'political spectacle.' For example, one can argue that such ethnographies can communicate to Hindu readers that Sikh militants have much reason for their anger and as a result, can familiarize the 'enemy' with the 'other.' However, one must consider the deep and long history of animosity between religious groups in India. Each and every word uttered by both the Indian government and the Sikh militants has a historical meaning attached to it since heteroglossia also refers to past and present meanings co-existing in the same language (Bakhtin 1981: 291). In this respect, each and every utterance acts upon and

creates a culture or atmosphere of tension, animosity and even violence. However, I have had personal ethnographic experience with an Afghani woman who fled her home country as a refugee to India. In this particular encounter, she talks about her life in India.

Everybody believes that people in India are fighting all the time. But for the most part this isn't true, because if it were, India would be in a state of war. But where my family lived, our neighbours, colleagues and friends were Muslim, Sikh, Hindu and Christian. The fighting that does occur doesn't happen all the time and are only the extreme cases (Seema, 2002).

Perhaps for the most part, India is indeed a heteroglot nation where people are willing to accommodate one another and respect their differing world views, thus producing a culture and society based on peaceful interaction and communication.

Ideal ethnographic encounters demand the utmost respect and attention to each and every word the participant utters because each and every response conditions and shapes future utterances. During my ethnographic interaction with a colleague who had fled Afghanistan, I admittedly possessed some assumptions and preconditioned ideas or images about the utter 'tragedy' of her life. Therefore, I was surprised to learn of her carefree and happy childhood in Afghanistan before the Soviet Union invaded, and the warmth and friendliness of her Muslim, Hindu, Christian, and Sikh neighbours and classmates. During this "dialogical" interaction with my colleague, we laughed with one another over the comical moments of her life such as the countless number of Bollywood films she had watched as a child, her family trips to the park every Sunday, and her family vacation in Kashmir (Seema 2002). Interestingly, Bakhtin argues that laughter is a vehicle which can be utilized to draw people closer and demolish fear and piety, thus enabling individuals to become more familiar with one another and produce dialogic communication (Bakhtin 1981: 23). In other words, laughter can liberate all individuals from personal and situated constraints, compelling individuals into open-ended communication with one another.

Laughter and heteroglossia usually occur

through open-ended interaction and the accommodation of each other's words (Bakhtin 1981: 23). Bakhtin also argues that laughter and heteroglossia can also manifest themselves during the European carnivals of the Middle Ages as depicted in the literature of French writer, Francois Rabelais. In Rabelais and His World, Bakhtin theorizes that the carnival is an event for each and every individual to participate in because everyone has the ability to laugh and enjoy its festivities (1984: 7,12). In fact, philosophers such as Aristotle theorize that of all the living creatures in the world, humans are endowed with the spiritual privilege of laughter (Bakhtin 1984: 68). Therefore, the carnival is not simply a spectacle to be viewed by spectators, but it is something to be lived in. Stripping away the social boundaries or false pretences between the higher classes and commoners, the carnival also has the potential to establish temporary communication between individuals which is otherwise impossible in ordinary everyday life (1984: 16). In other words, the carnival provides personal liberation by destroying or demolishing the established social order, hierarchical ranks, social statuses, thus bringing something much more joyous or even utopian to its present world (Bakhtin 1984: 10). Some literary critics such as Simon Dentith argue that the carnival is a "safety-valve" that reaffirms the existing status quo by allowing the masses to enjoy a temporary release from daily social constraints (1995: 73). However, I would argue that the carnival represents an ideal world that every individual should strive toward since once liberated from the "absolute" or "unchangeable" social ranks, people can proceed to interact and enjoy the company of one another (Bakhtin 1984: 83).

People who participate in the carnival become familiar and comfortable enough around one another enough to abuse one another such as depicted in Rabelais' Gargantua where characters often utilize insults such as "dullard" or "dirty fellow" (Bakhtin 1984: 168). Uses of insults greatly permeate the history of colonialism, a process based on exclusion and imposition. For example, North American society and culture is heavily burdened with a deep history of racism and violence which can be demonstrated in our use of language towards one another. In contrast to the familiar, good natured, or "friendly" abuse Bakhtin describes in Rabelais and His World (1984: 168), the term "nigger" is most often used as a deeply derogatory insult towards

African Americans, most of whom are descendants of slaves. However, although the term "nigger" undeniably has its racist connotations, some linguists may argue that many African Americans use the term to make light of it. In this respect, the term is indeed greatly heteroglossic since its derogatory past and historical meaning co-exist with for instance, the more lighthearted and comradely usage (Bakhtin 1981: 291). In his book, Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word, African American lawyer Randall Kennedy examines how many will understandably argue that such a term should never be used in any context due to its racist and violent history (2002: 34-35). However, Kennedy counter-argues that the protean term means different things in different contexts, as well as signifying a great degree of comfort, interaction, and familiarity between African Americans (2002: 34-35). It is understandable that many individuals advocate the complete abolition of this particular term. However, this particular trend of political correctness has the unfortunate potential to reduce the long and complex interaction between North Americans of both African and non-African descent, creating an insincere atmosphere of fraudulent politeness and social tensions rather than familiarity, understanding, or comfort.

Rabelais possessed firsthand experience of French carnivals he attended at Fonteney-le-Compte (Bakhtin 1984: 154). This particular carnival was held only three times a year and was frequently visited by German participants as well as the local Roma population, all of whom contributed to shaping the distinctive character of the carnival in Fonteney-le-Compte (Bakhtin 1984: 154). On another level, carnival as a cultural activity is most often studied in modern Caribbean and Latin American societies. The culture of the Caribbean islands is often described as a rich ethno-cultural mix or a "creolization" of several different world views. However, many Black Trinidadians claim that the Trinidad Carnival is a cultural product belonging entirely to those of African descent (Zavitz and Allahaar 2002: 125-126). Consequently, this particular claim excludes Trinidadians of Indian, Chinese, Lebanese, and Syrian descent (Zavitz and Allahaar 2002:129). According to historical records, the carnival originates from French planters and aristocrats from 1783 to 1883 (Zavitz and Allahaar 2002: 136). After national independence, the

majority of the carnival's participants are individuals of African descent although the event began to exhibit Indian influences through its music, later known as *chutney soca* (Zavitz and Allahaar 2002: 141). In this respect, the Trinidadian carnival is greatly indicative and symbolic of the nation's rich ethno-cultural or polyglossic mix. However, perhaps it is a stretch to view the Trinidad Carnival as heteroglossic since Black Trinidadians often exclude fellow civilians from the festivities and thus, reflect the asymmetrical social relations between ethnic and religious groups in Trinidad (Zavitz and Allahaar 2002: 126). However, the modern state of Trinidad expresses a rich blend of different ethnicities and cultures in spite of the tensions which exist between them.

### Grotesque Realism and Ethnographic Encounters

The most imposing or prevalent concept throughout Rabelais and His World is *grotesque realism* and Bakhtin's evocation of bodily images in Rabelais' literature. For example, Bakhtin discusses the way in which many grotesque images show two bodies in a single image as one body dies before transforming into a new one (Bakhtin 1984: 26). The grotesque body is considered to be unfinished or incomplete because it transgresses its own material limits by combining both birth and death in a single image (Bakhtin 1984: 26). In other words, birth and death are not events completely separated from one another, but are rather steps in a continuous cycle or process (1984: 50). In Rabelais and His World, body parts such as the belly are often exaggerated to emphasize not only their growth and renewal, but also their degradation as a low or base topographic part of the body (Bakhtin 1984: 19-21). For example, I had previously mentioned that Bakhtin theorizes that the carnival is about second life based on utopian ideals of laughter, joyous festivity, and liberation from established order or social hierarchy (1984:8-10); however, the grotesque body also degrades what is considered to be "high culture" by bringing it down to the earth to destroy it and giving it another life by conceiving something more enjoyable such as the carnival (Bakhtin 1984: 21).

Another feature of Bakhtin's grotesque realism is the consumption of tripe in Rabelais' Gargantua. The colons and bowels of tripe contain 10 percent excrement and its consumption signifies the devouring belly, thus representing life and death



drawn together into a single grotesque image (Bakhtin 1984: 162-163). Bakhtin argues that the human body forms an indivisible whole with its surrounding environment since people are constantly introducing and digesting external matter into their bodies through their mouths (Bakhtin 1984: 281). One might argue that cultural practices among Native cultures of North American are somewhat reminiscent of Bakhtin's theory of grotesque realism. For example, by investigating the remains of human bones in villages of several Iroquoian cultures in present-day Ontario, some archaeologists have uncovered evidence that warfare and cannibalism are widespread between native cultures (McMillan 1995: 65). Although a positive ideology exists behind such practices, such 'evidence' in Western culture and society might suggest 'animalistic' monstrosity or severe aggression. However, several Native cultures believed that during warfare, consuming the flesh of a captured warrior would 'absorb' his strength and courage (McMillan 1995: 77). Therefore, Native cannibalistic practises demonstrate aspects of Bakhtin's "grotesque realism" such as the combination of life and death into a single bodily form which gives birth to improved courage and strength within an individual. In other words, cannibalism as Aborigines have practised it led to spiritual elevation and enlightenment, a process far from the 'degradation' expressed by Europeans who viewed such practices with great ethnocentrism since they imposed Western ideas of cannibalism onto cultures other than their own.

Although grotesque realism is a 'positive' negation of the social order that transgresses boundaries by fusing the material body with the rest of the world, many would superficially view the world of the grotesque as strongly negative, distasteful, and a degradation of "high style" (Bakhtin 1984: 307-310). In a similar vein, early European explorers viewed Native cultures of what is now North and South America, as greatly distasteful and negative. For example, Spanish explorers of the sixteenth-century were aghast at the continuous warfare indigenous groups practised against one another, concluding that such cultures were addicted to satisfying their 'monstrous' and 'animalistic' hunger for human flesh (Stevenson 1992: 30). In other words, such cultures were supposedly disorderly, without discipline, and corrupted with an "evil" animosity towards one another (Stevenson

1992: 30-31). As European explorers and settlers colonized indigenous cultures, relations between the opposing groups became asymmetrical since those of European descent attempted to "civilize" and enlighten their 'captives' (Stevenson 1992: 30). French theorist Michael Foucault would argue that Native groups became objects of European power and domination that aims to manipulate or "discipline" them (1977: 136). The unequal distribution of power and authority between different social groups produces a multi-layered language which stratifies one social group above or below another (Bakhtin 1981: 29 and Stevenson 1992: 31). Furthermore, negative sentiments or beliefs about the culture of the "other" have the potential to devalue an individual because his/her culture is greatly dehumanized (Rapport 1997: 12).

Anthropologist Michael Stevenson argues that Eurocentric terminology which describes indigenous cultures as negatively "grotesque" or "savage" greatly suppresses one's capacity to identify with such groups as human beings and designates cultural 'others' into separate categories (1992: 31). Therefore, such a language creates difficulty for people across cultures to treat one another with the same dignity and respect one would hope for oneself. Furthermore, such terminology is remindful of "degeneration" from nineteenth century evolutionism which advocated the idea that some cultures will lose their sense of "civilization" and as a result, will become "savages" (McGee and Warms 2000: 5). In other words, cultural evolution was once viewed by theorists such as Lewis Henry Morgan as 'goal oriented' or progressive towards an ideal image such as Western society and culture (McGee and Warms 2000: 152). As most anthropologists have discovered over the years, such theories are highly ethnocentric since it stratifies Western cultures above cultures which are simply different in their philosophical ideology and outlook on life.

Boasian anthropologists such as Paul Radin are interested in what they can learn from the cultural "other" through interactive communication with individuals from different cultures (Darnell 2001: 145). Bakhtin would similarly argue that open-ended dialogic interaction between individuals transcends the private body into the material world which is inhabited by other people with their differing world views (Bakhtin 1984: 307-310). Therefore, the destruction of hierarchical ranks in the European



carnival or during simple dialogic interaction produces a *heteroglot* language which demolishes the anthropological boundaries between oneself and the cultural "other" (Bakhtin 1984: 23 and 1981: 293). In fact, Bakhtin argues that a person's identity remains fragmented until it interacts with differing viewpoints since a single individual consciousness cannot exist on its own (Danow 1991: 65). In more general terms, I would suggest that his theory can be translated into the notion of the inability of a single identity to exist in isolation since virtually every individual co-exists in relation with others. Therefore, the boundaries between self-identities are highly permeable or fluid rather than isolated from one another. In this situation, self-identities and differing world views can potentially supplement one another in a mutual manner and co-exist in a single consciousness in order to create a culture based on open ended dialogue, mutual communication, and reciprocal interaction (Bakhtin 1981: 291-292).

Radin also argues that the boundaries between the 'privileged' ethnographer and the cultural 'other' are also fluid since the former eventually realizes that all individuals are capable of philosophical thought in order to deal with the surrounding environment (Darnell 2001: 142). Therefore, conversing or interacting with one another can become a possibility. Radin also believes it is dangerous for an ethnographer to fall into speculation for its own sake and must interact and communicate with others from different cultures in order to learn from them (Darnell 2001: 145). Franz Boas similarly criticizes evolutionary theorists by arguing that all cultures possess social organization and knowledge which evolve in accordance to their environmental conditions, psychological factors, and historical connections (McGee and Warms 2000: 159). Most anthropologists would probably argue that ethnographers should actually interact at a close distance with individuals from differing cultures in order to transcend the unfamiliarity of their ideas, customs, and cultural practices (Geertz 1988: 48). After all, "what is remote close up is, at a remove, near" (Geertz 1988: 48). Furthermore, ethnographers must realize that every cultural idea and practice has multiple meanings since every meaning is multi-layered (McGee and Warms 2000: 521 and Bakhtin 1981: 291). Therefore, "cultural analysis" will always be incomplete or *centripetal* and thus, open for further elaboration and creative interpretation

(McGee and Warms 2000: 521 and Bakhtin 1981: 271).

### **Ethnographic Writing and the Polyphonic Novel**

Bakhtin produced several theories on the history of the novel which he claims is a piece of "unfinished" literature (Bakhtin 1981: 3). Although the novel possesses no generic characteristics, one salient feature which he finds consistent in every novel is flexible language permeated with irony and humour (Bakhtin 1981: 7-8). In other words, the novel is a literary vehicle which is multi-layered and filled with a variation of meanings which in turn can be interpreted in a number of different ways. Perhaps most importantly, Bakhtin claims that the novel is determined by experience, knowledge, and practice (1981: 15). Radin theorizes that knowledge subjectively differs for each and every individual, and is constructed in relation to personal experiences (Darnell 2001: 145). Not surprisingly, Bakhtin strongly criticizes the epic genre because it is based on a "great" yet inaccessible past, since it is not tied to the relative present which the reader inhabits (Bakhtin 1981: 18). Thus, the epic genre is isolated or beyond the realm of human activity (Bakhtin 1981: 13-16).

In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin critically examines the literature of Russian novelist, Fyodor Dostoevsky. Bakhtin considers Dostoevsky's novels to be greatly heteroglossic since the character of the novel is ideologically independent from the author and is not a product of the latter's finalized artistic vision (1984: 5). The manifestation of heteroglossia in the novel is otherwise known as *polyphony* where the viewpoints of the author and the character do not coincide. Dostoevsky's novel is considered to be "multi-accented," producing the contradiction of values in its discourse (Bakhtin 1984: 15). If the "multi-accents" interact with one another in a dialogical manner, I would deduce that creative communication could possibly occur, consequently producing heteroglossic concepts or new and different meanings. Bakhtin also claims that Dostoevsky possesses the capability to interpret a visualization into someone else's psyche (Bakhtin 1984: 36). This particular task is what ethnographers attempt to accomplish in order to understand a world view. Indeed, one can proceed to understand a different world view and its cultural ideologies by opening up

dialogical conversations based on familiarity and comfort with different people (Bakhtin 1981: 23). Once incorporated into the novel, heteroglossia can be viewed as:

[A]nother's speech in another's language, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way. Such speech constitutes a special type of double voiced discourse. It serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author. In such discourse, there are two voices, two meanings, and two expressions. And all the while these two voices are dialogically interrelated, they-as it were- know about each other just as two exchanges in a dialogue know of each other and are structures in this mutual knowledge of each other; it is as if they actually hold a conversation with each other. Double-voiced discourse is always internally dialogized (Bakhtin 1981: 324).

The description of the heteroglossic or polyphonic novel can also be used to describe an effective ethnography which is essentially a literary vehicle expressing voices which have otherwise been silenced by various external structures or factors. In other words, an effective ethnography should be able to express multiple voices by communicating them to an audience through a literary medium. Since an ethnography captures an encounter or conversation between an anthropologist and another individual, an ethnography should therefore contain multiple speakers which demonstrate the 'dialogical' exchange and interaction between the two objects. As Bakhtin argues, the author does not exist outside of the literary use of language of the character, but is rather a very important part of the process since he or she is in a constant dialogue with the characters (1981: 254).

Past ethnographies, such as those written by European explorers who encountered Native cultures in the New World, have unfortunately attempted to pigeonhole Aborigines into cultural categories or labels other than their own without attempting to comprehend their world view. One can argue that an ethnography can never be genuinely polyphonic since

any utterance will inevitably be translated and modified within a person's interpretive framework (Darnell 2001: 145). Therefore, ethnographers are not fundamentally analysing a culture but are producing their personal ideas in their own vision. However, the ethnographer's interpretive framework can be minimized in order that both intentions are expressed to the ethnographer's best ability. This particular argument raises questions concerning authorship and the ethical responsibilities ethnographers must abide by. For example, Geertz theorizes that anthropologists should avoid positivist modes of rhetoric such as "objective facts" (1988: 136). Complete objectivity cannot exist in anthropological thought since every individual within a culture is constantly changing and evolving through time and space which the anthropologist attempts to understand through self-reflexive and open-ended interpretation. This particular argument bears resemblance to Bakhtin's *chronotope* or the idea that metamorphic characters will evolve throughout a discourse of a novel and within their own time and space (1981: 113).

Throughout much of the past, early explorers as well as early anthropologists have unfortunately used their privileges to attack or even assail individuals of different cultures by attempting to arrange them into unflattering categories such as "savage" or "barbarian" (McGee and Warms 2000: 48). Furthermore, some anthropologists such as Lewis Henry Morgan theorized that "savage" or "barbarian" cultures would eventually evolve into a western cultural image without much critical examination of local ideas of change and evolution within their own concepts of time and space (McGee and Warms 2000: 48). However, I optimistically believe that for the most part, contemporary anthropologists have learned from past 'mistakes' through self-reflexive thought and careful self-scrutiny. As a result, many contemporary anthropologists are now attempting to create a common culture and society based on mutual respect and trust through reciprocal communication, dialogue, and interaction between individuals. As Geertz theorizes, culture can be defined as a socially shared code of meaning created through the interactive actions of individuals and can consequently be interpreted like a literary text through its symbols which formulate a "thick" complex web or ensemble of different voices and

perspectives (1973: 5,9). In this respect, 'culture' or symbolic meanings can also be produced between those with different ideologies and world views. Furthermore, cultural anthropologists seem to be maneuvering into a more positive direction where the disparity between elite and privileged anthropologists and the cultural 'other' will be minimized.

### Conclusion

Clifford Geertz argues that cultural meanings constantly remain complex and multi-layered due to their incomplete and open-ended nature (McGee and Warms 2000: 521). Bakhtin would similarly argue that such meanings of any particular utterance will constantly alter and change within a different context or within a different time and space (1981:276). In other words, each utterance takes form within a particular historical moment and environment, but alters in accordance to the social dialogue of that particular context (Bakhtin 1981: 276). All anthropological discourse concerning the interpretation of ideas or world views of any particular culture are also incomplete or unfinalized because they are individual interpretations that cannot be regarded as primary sources of knowledge (Darnell 2001: 144). Therefore, such knowledge remains accessible for dialogical elaboration and further translation since culture never remains static over time and space (Geertz 1988: 16). However, if anthropologists are to interpret such changes, their research must be based on inclusion, accommodation, and open-ended dialogue in order to prevent a demeaning encounter where relations between individuals as well as cultures become asymmetrical.

Many scholars advocate the notion that cultural anthropologists should be striving for open-ended communication based on reciprocal exchange and accommodation between individuals and culture in order to interpret ideas that are indicative of world views. Although Bakhtin was not an anthropologist, his theories on the multi-vocal nature of language within both literature and common routines of daily life enable anthropologists to extend beyond the realm of social theory in order to attain a multi-disciplinary approach to comprehending a foreign point of view which is historically and culturally situated. Anthropologists such as Geertz theorize that social distances between an ethnographer and the cultural 'other' should be narrowed in order to arrive at open-ended conclusions concerning their observations and

interactive communication (1988: 16). More importantly, an established 'bridge' of communication provides opportunities for individuals to exchange ideas in a reciprocal manner in order to supply a strong foundation for not only comfort, familiarity, and laughter, but also the production of heteroglossic language and speech.

### Bibliography

- Bakhtin, Mikhail M. 1981. *The Dialogic Imagination*. Translated by C. Emerson and M. Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Bakhtin, Mikahil M. 1984. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Translated by C. Emerson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Bakhtin, Mikahil M. 1984. *Rabelais and His World*. Translated by H. Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Danow, David K. 1991. *The Thought of Mikhail Bakhtin: From Word to Culture*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Darnell, Regna. 2001. *Invisible Genealogies: A History of the Americanist Anthropology*. London: University of Nebraska Press.
- Dentith, Simon. 1995 *Bakhtinian Thought: An introductory reader*. New York: Routledge.
- Foucault, Michel. 1977. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by A. Sheridan. New York: Vintage Books.
- Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays by Clifford Geertz*. New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers.
- Geertz, Clifford. 1988. *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*. Stanford CA: Stanford University Press.
- Kennedy, Randall. 2002. *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- McGee, R.Jon. and Warms, Richard L. 2000. *Anthropological Theory: An Introductory History*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Mountain View: Mayfield Publishing Company.
- McMillan, Alan D. 1995. *Native Peoples and*

*Cultures Across Canada*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition.  
Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre Ltd.

Mahmood, Cynthia K. 1996. *Fighting for Faith and Nation: Dialogue with Sikh Militants*.  
Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Rapport, Nigel. 1997. *Transcendent Individual: Towards a Literary and Liberal Anthropology*.  
London: Routledge.

Seema, S. 2002. Unpublished Field Notes.  
London, Ontario, Canada.

Stevenson, Michael. 1992. Columbus and the war on indigenous peoples. *Race and Class*. 33(3):27-45.

Zavitz, Amanda L and Allahar, Anton L. 2002. Racial Politics and Cultural Identity in Trinidad's Carnival. *Identity*. 2(2):125-145.