

Chapter One

Anomaly and Cosmography in Comparative Perspective

All higher knowledge is acquired by comparison, and rests on comparison. . . . The same applies to religion. *He who knows one, knows none.*

Friedrich Max Müller (1873, 9–13)

A pure ethnography or history that is uncontaminated by generalizations based on comparative inquiry is an ideal that cannot exist in practice.

Howard Eilberg-Schwartz (1990, 98)

In this chapter, I will try to articulate in an abstract, programmatic way what seem to me to be the questions and angles of approach most likely to yield fundamental insight into why, in any culture or period, texts about anomalies might come to be written, what and how they might mean, why they are significant, and how they may most fruitfully be read by people of other cultures or periods. These issues transcend cultural, historical, linguistic, and disciplinary bounds. To my mind, they are the issues that make such texts humanly significant, hence worth reading and pondering regardless of one's special area of expertise, disciplinary allegiance, or professional niche.

Anomaly and Cosmography

"Cosmography" means, simply, a description of the world. For convenience, I will use it in a not unrelated but much more specific and technical sense to mean the creation, development, and persuasive use (by some particular agent or group of agents) of a discourse concerning anomalies for the purpose of promoting, refining, confirming, or challenging a belief-system, worldview, or ideology. In what follows I will elaborate upon this stipulative and necessarily elaborate definition. Let us begin with "anomalies."

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the primary senses of "anomaly" thus:

1. Unevenness, inequality, of condition, motion, etc.
2. Irregularity, deviation from the common order, exceptional condition or circumstance. . . . A thing exhibiting such irregularity; an anomalous thing or being.

Bound up in its very definition is the fact that anomaly is an essentially taxonomic affair. That is to say, anomaly is inherently a matter of the discrimination of kinds or domains of objects, beings or states, and of the boundaries between them. On the face of it, the anomalous is that which is taken by an observer or speaker as crossing some boundary.

It is also immediately evident that a perception or ascription of anomaly presumes, even if in most cases only tacitly, some *nomos*, some given order of things, a background of what are taken as usual, normal, or expected conditions or objects or beings, including the normal boundaries among these. One cannot speak of the anomalous without assuming and implying some view of the normal against which it appears as such. Or, as Mary Douglas put it, "Where there is dirt there is system."¹ This implied "system" or normal state of affairs can be quite specific or sweepingly general, depending on context; but it can usually be linked in turn, more or less directly, to a larger worldview, belief-system, or ideology of which it forms an explicit part or by which it is entailed.

Any discourse about anomalies is a representation to an audience about things strange. To that extent, even when the discourse is a "memorate" in the first person singular that claims to report personal experience, it reflects conventions and assumptions held by its intended audience; it cannot truly be "people's own, *purely*

1. Douglas 1969, 35.

personal experiences,"² to cite one famous definition of the memoir, for such experiences would be unique and hence culturally unintelligible. It is at the level of these collective conventions and assumptions, then, that I propose to approach cosmographic texts. The notion of anomaly I intend in this chapter is a matter of cultural construction and social discourse, not of individual perception, which in any case is hardly accessible through most cosmographic genres. At issue is not the experience of the strange but the how and why of its representation.

For the same reasons, anomaly should be understood strictly as a cultural and not as a natural phenomenon. As Jonathan Z. Smith observes, anomaly is not an ontological but an epistemological and rhetorical category.

"Otherness" is not a descriptive category. . . . It is a political and linguistic project, a matter of rhetoric and judgement. It is for this reason that in thinking about the "other," real progress has been made only when the "other" ceases to be an ontological category. . . . Despite its apparent taxonomic exclusivity, "otherness" is a transactional matter, an affair of the "in-between."³

In the strictest sense, anomalies do not simply happen. Events happen, various people and objects exist, and they are judged and called odd, extraordinary, even contranatural by human agents within communities, who judge and call them so with reference to some reigning worldview, system, or ideology into which they do not readily fit.⁴ This judging and calling are the stuff of cosmography.

When these ascriptions of anomaly cease to be isolated speech-acts and become lasting focal points for social discourse, we can begin to speak of a cosmographic tradition.⁵ Over time, such traditions arise, develop, flourish, wither, and die. As they develop and mature, they will necessarily and often quickly become routinized into distinct genres, that is, specific sets of discursive properties codified by society through habitual practice or explicit

2. von Sydow 1948, 73, ital. mine; cf. Dégh and Vázsonyi 1974; Honko 1964; Brandes 1974.

3. Smith 1985, 46.

4. Needham 1979, 46; Murray 1983; Lincoln 1989, 165; Humphreys 1968, 18, 20, 33, 90–92; but cf. Hunn 1979.

5. Shils 1981.

principle. Genres set horizons of expectation for the audience and models of performance for contributors. Performers (including but not limited to authors) perform as a function of, though not necessarily in strict accord with, the existing generic conventions. Apparent violations of those conventions help (like any other anomalies) to confirm their existence and make clear—or change—their boundaries. On the other hand, the audience watches, hears, or reads any performance as a function of the relevant generic conventions, though not necessarily consciously and not always passively.⁶

Cosmographic traditions and their genres are rarely born by someone's conscious decision. Traditions and genres take shape by a halting process of comparison, differentiation, and contrast with other traditions and genres. In this process, new channels of discourse are cut, their boundaries with already existing traditions and genres being constantly tested and redefined. The creation of a new tradition or genre of discourse is a matter of carving out a new intellectual, textual, and cultural space or niche in which to work. The new genre is often justified, however, especially in societies that primarily locate authority in an exemplary past, by an appeal to historical precedent, real or imagined.⁷ As the genre comes into being, a new set of expectations and models is codified, a new project defined and made available for the participation of agents and audience. This process also results in the creation of a new object of discourse, defined through comparison, differentiation, and contrast with other objects, just as the genre is defined by contrast with other genres.⁸

A complete typology, even an adequate survey, of cosmographic genres is unnecessary here, but I would like in a few sentences to suggest the range of media and genres that have been employed cosmographically. Despite the etymology of the term, a cosmography may be danced, gestured, or sung. Contact cults, including the famous "cargo cults," are the most obvious examples.⁹ But any acted-out representation of anomalous others qualifies as cosmographic—consider exorcisms, or certain types of rites for the dead—and we may speak of genres of (cosmographic) ritual action as well as of written literature. Cosmographic work may also be

6. Todorov 1975, 1976; Dubrow 1982.

7. Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983.

8. Foucault 1972, 1973.

9. Burridge 1960; Wagner 1979; Sahllins 1981; Schieffelin and Crittenden 1991.

done in visual media. Perhaps the most familiar examples are old mapping traditions such as the medieval European maps that taxonomized the known world into three parts and filled the interstices and *terrae incognitae* with pictures of mythical beasts,¹⁰ but any visual representation of anomalous beings, objects, places, events, perhaps even times carries cosmographic weight. When we come finally to literary genres, the range is enormous. One might begin by distinguishing narrative from non-narrative types. Narrative cosmographic genres are probably almost coextensive with narrative genres, since it is hard to imagine any that may not be used cosmographically; but the most prominent include the epic, exotic travel literature in its various sub-genres including pilgrimage accounts,¹¹ poetic or scriptural narratives of spirit-travels and dream visions, historical works, folktales, legends, miracle tales, and memorates. The non-narrative genres range from geographic and topographic accounts through ethnographies and "theoretical" treatises of various sorts to sheer taxonomic lists and tables. To speak of a text or performance as cosmographic is to specify nothing concerning its form but rather to characterize its subject matter (anomalies of one or many kinds) and its purpose.

What, then, of its purpose? Cosmographies are sometimes created or invoked in order to support a particular worldview, ideology, or belief-system—often, but not necessarily, the one that is culturally dominant or held by the most powerful elite(s). This support may take the form of confirming a set of beliefs or tenets, thus strengthening the entire ideological system; or of refining the system in some particular respect, enabling it to deal with a new area of experience, a problematic issue, or a nagging exception. In other cases, cosmographic discourse is used to undermine a dominant worldview without necessarily offering a clearly articulated alternative system. In still others, it may be used simultaneously to attack one belief-system and promote another. Furthermore, these and other uses may co-exist within a single cosmographic tradition, genre, or sub-genre. Traditions and genres of cosmographic discourse should not be thought of as rigidly implying commitment to a single, particular worldview, although in any given historical context they may be better suited to some worldviews than to others. Rather, a single tradition or genre more often than not becomes a public field of contention on which individuals or groups play out conflicts and contend for power, using shared conventions of dis-

10. Wright 1965 [1925], 65ff. and 121ff.

11. Campbell 1988; Harbsmeier 1985, 1986; Helms 1988.

course about a single object or type of object to advance divergent ends.

Cosmographic performances and/or texts adopt varying stances toward the anomalous.¹² "Anomalies can be ignored, ridiculed, distorted, or suppressed, these all being means whereby they are relegated to the margins and interstices of both a given classificatory system and . . . lived experience. Alternatively, the system under which they are judged anomalous can be modified or abandoned,"¹³ as happens in so-called scientific revolutions and paradigm shifts.¹⁴ As Bruce Lincoln notes of the latter case, more is almost always at stake than a mere intellectual change; social and ideological consequences also follow.¹⁵ But we must add that there is no necessary correlation between a dismissive stance toward anomalies and the maintenance of the dominant worldview, nor between recognizing anomalies and rejecting the dominant worldview. In principle, either approach to anomalies can be used to support or to undermine a reigning ideology. Such an ideology might, for example, be based upon not the blanket dismissal but the ongoing recognition and assimilation of anomalies under taxonomic schemes of order. In this latter case, the ongoing micro-revision of the dominant taxonomic system may serve merely to maintain its dominance, not to bring it down, for encounters with anomalies have (in such a system) been portrayed as the very occasions on which the system's power is recreated and displayed. On the other hand, this constant micro-revision may reshape the taxonomic system over time; but again, this reshaping may either challenge or preserve intact the dominant ideology.

In some knowledge systems or historical contexts, such as certain of those in which modern Western scientists work, anomalies are posed chiefly in order to be explained or classified and thus domesticated. Once posed, they may not typically endure for very long. In other knowledge systems or historical contexts, anomalies may be longstanding and frequently returned to in discourse; the point, for some participants in the discourse, might not be to "solve" them but precisely to keep them around as long as possible.¹⁶ Despite the impression one gets from reading treatments of anomalies in the literature on the philosophy of science and in some anthropo-

12. Needham 1979, 46.

13. Lincoln 1989, 165.

14. Kuhn 1970.

15. Cf. Morris 1979.

16. Cf. Needham 1979, 46.

logical works, anomalies are not always and everywhere extremely troubling and domesticated as rapidly as possible; this is only one sort of reaction to anomaly.

Why is cosmographic discourse important in a society or culture? What makes anomalies so “good to think with” and fruitful to talk about, both for the human communities we study and for us who study them?

In the first place, anomalies and incongruities provide occasions for creative thought and action in communities, and so they are good places to observe a human community at work and at play, to note the awakened craft of its response to history. For a good part of the twentieth century, in justifiable reaction to earlier assumptions about the supposed haziness and superstition of non-Westerners’ cultures, Western scholars have tended to overemphasize congruity, conformity, repetition, “mechanisms,” and the logic of systems. But it is anomalies—the perceived fractures and gaps in such systems, the “perceptions of discrepancy and discord[—] which give rise to the symbolic project that we identify as the very essence of being human.”¹⁷ Anomalies stimulate testings, evaluations, modifications, or stretchings of knowledge-systems and action-patterns. In this sense they are grist for a culture’s mill. They are the raw material on which a culture works, and although a culture perdures over time by executing an ongoing series of “micro-adjustments” on such material,¹⁸ the creative, ongoing, historical, and processual aspects of these “adjustments” have not always been fully appreciated by structuralists, functionalists, and other such “systematists.”

Anomalies also, then, provide a lever for intellectual, ideological, and social change.¹⁹ Anomalies include, but are not limited to, those places where a community’s cognitive systems or social structures palpably bump up against a recalcitrant, external reality, giving exponents of internal reform or revolution an opportunity to make their case. Conversely, anomalies are the internal weak points, lines, or fissures that must be defended by exponents of existing systems and structures. Cosmographic discourse can serve both purposes, often simultaneously. The concept of anomaly includes some of what falls under the rubric of “liminality,” except that anomaly is not a ritual phase, is usually not ritually constructed, and need not give rise to “danger” in a purely negative

17. Smith 1978a, 297. Cf. Smith 1974.

18. Lévi-Strauss 1966, 10.

19. Kuhn 1970; Ohnuki-Tierney 1990a, 18.

sense.²⁰ As is true of liminal situations, anomalous events, places, and beings are sometimes fraught with the danger and the power that arise when boundaries are crossed. Anomaly is to ideology or worldview what liminality is to ritual. To deal with anomaly is often to enter an arena charged with danger and to engage issues of power.

Anomalies are “good to think with” in at least one other respect: by their alterity they prompt individual and collective self-reflection. They are thus key vehicles for the collective fashioning of identity and the construction of society. Cultures, groups, religious traditions and sects often indirectly display what they are or hope to be by saying what they are not.²¹ Human communities construct themselves as communities by negotiating an ongoing series of resemblances and differences between themselves and all manner of others (not only other human communities) through classificatory, comparative processes.

To this point I have discussed anomaly and cosmography in terms general enough to apply to virtually any society. I now wish to address specifically those modes of cosmography most characteristic of large-scale, urban cultures.

Collecting Curiosities: Anomalies Bound and Unbound

In traditional societies, the city is typically a sacred zone, a center of ceremony and ritual display. The city can be characterized not only in demographic and socioeconomic terms but also as a center of symbolic action, serving as the exemplar or “style center” for an entire people.²² The rise of such sacred urban centers is often linked to a characteristic type of worldview, in which the key elements are schemes of spatial-cosmic orientation, “the elevation of leaders to the level of supreme rulers whose actions insured the harmony of heaven and earth,”²³ and calendrical systems which

20. van Gennep 1960; Douglas 1969, 1975, 1982; Turner 1969.

21. For salient examples, White 1991; Ohnuki-Tierney 1987, 1990b; Céard 1977; Wright 1947, 1965 [1925]; White 1991; White 1972; Todorov 1984.

22. Wheatley 1969, 1971; Wheatley and See 1978; Geertz 1968, 36–38, and 1980; Tambiah 1976; Smith 1987; Smith and Reynolds 1987; Long 1986, 65–78; Eliade 1959, chap. 1; Eliade 1976, 18–31; Eliade 1961, 37–38.

23. Carrasco 1982, 71.

effect a synchronicity between human life and the rhythms of the cosmos.

In all societies in which sacred centers figure, a dialectical structure is inherent, for a center implies a periphery. Sacred urban centers do not exist in geographical or social vacuums, but depend for their ceremonial status as well as economic subsistence on hierarchically ordered, centripetal and centrifugal interactions with people in the surrounding countryside as well as with itinerant merchants and foreigners. From the point of view of a center of urban culture, the "distance" between the center and its periphery is seldom a matter of mere geographical space, or of the calendrical time required for the journey out and back. The peripheral is, from a centrist perspective, the anomalous—the external other. The distance, then, is also an ontological, moral, taxonomic, and aesthetic distance. Once constructed through discourse, this distance is carefully maintained as a balance or tension across various sorts of taxonomic boundaries and socio-geographic "frontiers."²⁴

In centrist ideologies, therefore, the center's interaction with its anomalous periphery often becomes a matter of controlling it by dividing it into parts and assigning these parts distinct places²⁵ in some hierarchical and taxonomic scheme. The notion of place becomes fundamental, and "the concern to assign every single creature, object or feature to a place within a class"²⁶ becomes paramount. Agents of the center strive through cosmographic discourse—as well as by other, decidedly more overt and violent means—to "encompass," "domesticate," or somehow "cope with" the periphery and thus subsume anomaly under order.²⁷ As a general designation for all such acts of emplacement, I propose the term *collection*. Obviously based on the familiar phenomenon of the grouping within a central enclave of objects imported from outside, I will use this term as shorthand to designate the variety of ways in which anomalies are domesticated and re-presented in the interest of, and from the point of view of, the center. "The collection of the world"—the repetitious act, informed by "a structure of desire," of both temporarily closing and ultimately preserving the gap between center and periphery—has been the dominant mode of cos-

24. Bohannon and Plog 1967. Cf. Turner 1973; Harbsmeier 1985, 1986.

25. Smith 1987.

26. Lévi-Strauss 1966, 10.

27. "Encompass": Dumont 1980, 239ff.; "domesticate": Goody 1977, chap. 1; "cope with": Barraclough 1979. Overall, cf. Todorov 1984.

mography in traditional urban cultures.²⁸ Expressed through a variety of specific rituals, myths, and institutions, collection has been a fundamental "key scenario"²⁹ of order in most large-scale, urban societies.

Whatever specific forms it takes, collection entails out-and-back crossings between center and periphery. On leaving the center, the collector—as I will, for brevity's sake, call any collecting agent—enters wild, undomesticated terrain, a country of marvels and wonders. Taxonomically speaking, the space traversed by the collector is not homogeneous; the collector ranges through hierarchically ordered categories of barbarism, finely graded degrees of distance from the center, and his journey—or pilgrimage—recapitulates the taxa of the center's cosmographic map.³⁰ The collector's journey through space and through categories of "others" is a journey through time as well, as is readily seen when one recalls the longstanding Western discourse on the "primitive."³¹

The collector brings home part of the wilderness, whether it be in the form of stories and reports, objects, or images. What is brought back is displayed, accounted for in some fashion. Four general points about this display should be made here. First, what is brought back has been selected. From a background of commonplace facts, the collector often takes back to the center only those that are noteworthy in the most literal sense, striking, unusual, extraordinary—in a word, anomalous. The collection par excellence thus consists of things that make manifest the difference between the center and the periphery. A fourteenth-century European cosmographic text exemplifies this aspect of collecting in such statements as: "In Greece I neither saw nor heard of aught worth telling, unless it be that . . .," and "In Armenia the Greater I saw one marvel. . . . But I saw not anything else . . . worth telling as a marvel."³²

28. The first phrase in quotation marks has been taken from the suggestive title of Defert 1982–83; the second, from Clifford 1985, 239. Clifford borrowed it from Stewart 1984, ix: "Narrative is seen in this essay as a structure of desire, a structure that both invents and distances its object and thereby inscribes again and again the gap between signifier and signified that is the place of generation for the symbolic."

29. Ortner 1973.

30. Harbsmeier 1985.

31. Smith 1985; Fabian 1983; Long 1986, chap. 6; Lovejoy and Boas 1935; Boas 1948.

32. Jordanus 1863, 2–7. It is striking that the author, dividing his work by geographical regions, left entire sections empty when he knew nothing "marvelous" to report about certain regions. Thus the section on

Second, to borrow a metaphor from Lévi-Strauss (who borrowed it from tribal societies), collected objects participate in a paradox. On the one hand, they are held to exemplify "raw" wilderness, to emblemize its otherness, yet they can do so only in "cooked" form, divorced from their natural setting and re-presented in a field of other objects arranged by the collector. The objects of collection, like the collector himself, are changed utterly. But collectors often use various devices to mask this mutation. Among these devices is the stereotype: a topos which, because it is constantly returned to in successive collections, gives the illusion that the object out there must be correctly described.³³ Such stereotypes are often remarkably durable. For example, the "marvels of the East," a set of fantastic images of India formed by Greek writers such as Herodotus, Ktesias, and Megasthenes, and passed on to medieval Europe in the works of Pliny, Solinus, Macrobius, and Martianus of Capella, "did not die altogether with the geographical discoveries and a better knowledge of the East, but lived on in pseudo-scientific dress right into the 17th and 18th centuries," and so "determined the western idea of India for almost 2000 years."³⁴

Third, collected objects are displayed according to some principle or structure, not randomly. "The good collector (opposed to the obsessive, the miser) is tasteful and systematic. Accumulation unfolds in a pedagogical, edifying manner. The collection itself, its taxonomic, aesthetic structure, is valued."³⁵ Principles of classification and display may command more attention from cosmographers and their audiences than the anomalous objects themselves.

Finally, in urban traditions the display often aims at a complete *summa* of the cosmos. The taxonomic space of cosmographic display becomes a *plenum* to mirror the world it emblemizes; nothing less is intended than a total re-presentation of the world. A map, for instance, will arrange and divide the entire earth according to the cosmographic principles of its tradition, sometimes filling in the *terrae incognitae* with such place-holders as monstrous creatures and peoples so as to leave no space blank. It will further

Aran (a land mentioned in the Bible) consists of the following notice: "Concerning Aran I say nothing at all, seeing that there is nothing worth noting" (50). This paragraph is not to suggest, however, that the only reason things catch travelers' eye is their exotic quality; there are many other criteria, many other agendas that spur collectors on their quest—military, commercial, and so on.

33. Foster 1982–83, 29.

34. Wittkower 1942, 159; cf. Wright 1965 [1925], 274ff.; Lach 1965–1977, 1:3–86.

35. Clifford 1985, 238–39. Cf. Stocking 1983.

express the idea of totality by means of measurement and scale: it represents all of space, whose dimensions can be expressed numerically, by means of correspondingly measured places on its own surface.³⁶

In general, then, we may say that the goal of collection is the domestication of that which is dangerously wild, the fixing of anomaly in a stable format, a determinative taxonomic place. But even where collection appears most successful, it is still the anomalous that is collected; and the dialectical structure of collection continually recreates and maintains, even as it also spans, the distance between center and periphery. The anomalous fact or object is emplaced within a cosmographic system, hence domesticated; but the whole point of collecting it is to display its foreignness, and "what is foreign is that which escapes from a place."³⁷ Even at its most hegemonic, therefore, collection does not permanently destroy the anomalous and the peripheral, but in fact presupposes their existence. Further, the collector's striving toward total representation is of course more a dream than an institutional fact; it is the dream of central elites in most traditional urban societies, but history shows that it is never permanently fulfilled. Collection, essentially an attempt to control reality, is not a uniformly or ultimately successful enterprise, for if one thing is certain it is that reality cannot be fully controlled.

Nor have all urban elites always wanted to control it. Collection is typically tied to what Jonathan Z. Smith has termed a "locative" worldview; but in reaction to this type of worldview there often arises what he terms a "utopian" one. This distinction can form the basis of a useful model for understanding cosmographies.

In a *locative* worldview, the chief preoccupation is the control of reality by means of boundaries. The sacred center is an enclave to be marked off and defended against outsiders. Humanity patterns its life on the fundamental principles of the cosmos. Harmony with cosmic order is paramount; rebellion against cosmic order is a barbaric—and futile—act serving only to highlight order more clearly. Primary, positive religious and cultural value is placed on control and on the mechanisms of control; loss of control, or existence outside the enclave, amount to barbarism at best, ultimate chaos at worst. Historically, utopian worldviews have usually arisen as reactions against locative ones, and they are sometimes,

36. Wright 1965 [1925], 65ff. and 121ff.; Wright 1947; Dilke 1985; Harvey 1980, esp. chap. 8; Robinson and Petchenik 1976, chap. 3.

37. de Certeau 1986, 70.

though not necessarily, associated with religions of salvation. In a *utopian* worldview, the limits that are established to confine the sacred come to be felt as oppressing humanity itself. "Man is no longer defined by the degree to which he harmonizes himself and his society to the cosmic patterns of order; but rather by the degree to which he can escape the patterns."³⁸ Primary value is placed on freedom, and dominant cultural or religious mechanisms of control and order are relativized. Smith's characterization of utopian worldviews is largely based on Hellenistic religions, and in his model a utopian view does not necessarily presuppose a locative view against which it reacts. I propose to use the term *anti-locative* instead of Smith's "utopian," both to emphasize the typically reactionary nature of this sort of view and to make the model applicable beyond the Hellenistic context.

The relevant point for our understanding of cosmography is that in any anti-locative view of the world the enterprise of collecting becomes problematic. Either it is left off entirely or its displays become increasingly self-reflexive and self-ironic. People are no longer sure of the value or even the possibility of taxonomically placing anomalies with any finality. The difference between center and periphery, "system" and "dirt," "us" and "them" ceases to be clear, or at least no longer carries much weight. The center as an enclave or hamlet now dissolves into an open space; the preoccupation with emplacing every anomaly into some ordered scheme now gives way to the obliteration of old distinctions. The center itself becomes an other; "what is near masks a foreignness."³⁹ People begin to speak of the "normal" as including "facts just as wonderful as those that we go collecting in remote countries and centuries," since "it is one and the same nature that rolls its course," to quote Montaigne, a master of anti-locative collecting.⁴⁰

Under these conditions, the project of collecting may continue for a while under its old guises, but it comes to be carried out in an increasingly ironic and acutely self-conscious mode, and is thus slowly altered and ultimately undermined from within. Its political structures of domination, once masked, are now highlighted. The "other out there," often linguistically and metaphorically consigned (as Johannes Fabian has eloquently shown) to a temporal past or an eternal present, now stands as an actual living being among the displayed objects, which are themselves increasingly presented as

38. Smith 1978a, 139–40; cf. Smith 1978b, 429.

39. de Certeau 1986, 67.

40. Frame 1958, 342–43.

processes or artifacts “belonging” to (if no longer “owned” by) cultures lying outside the urban center.⁴¹ One might say, as a general rule, that the more anti-locative the setting in which collection is carried out, the more sophisticatedly self-aware collection becomes and the more problematic it is revealed to be. Western academic anthropology over the last century and a quarter is an excellent example of the historical vicissitudes to which a cosmographic tradition is subject: once locative, it is now experiencing an extremely anti-locative moment.⁴²

We have to deal, in short, with two modes of cosmography, or perhaps a spectrum of modes. At one end—the locative—ultimate value is given to emplacing anomaly and domesticating the other, for these are the acts by which the cultural center is constructed. At the other end of the spectrum—the anti-locative—value is given to the critique of, or escape from, this emplacement and domestication, for ultimate value is taken to lie elsewhere. At any moment in its history, a cosmographic tradition may tend as a whole toward one or another end of this spectrum; or, more commonly, some authors (for in urban traditions it is almost always a question of written media) will write from a locative, others from an anti-locative viewpoint. Furthermore, within any society a variety of locative and anti-locative views may be advanced simultaneously, and rival versions of the “center” may thus be advanced—for the center of an urban tradition is always constructed and contested. Particular cosmographic genres, media, topics, or motifs may come to be predominantly used by agents of one perspective against others. These may also then be co-opted by opponents, their messages reversed or inverted.

I now wish to attend briefly to one key medium of cosmography, and specifically of the project of “collecting the world,” in most urban traditions: the act of writing itself, and the nature of the product. Cosmography means, after all, writing down the cosmos.

Inside and Outside the Cabinet of Writing

For much of its existence, writing has performed the symbolic functions of binding, fixing, delimiting, even coercing.⁴³ Beyond such

41. Clifford 1985, 244–45.

42. Clifford and Marcus 1986; Marcus and Fischer 1986.

43. On the general history and phenomenological and cultural meaning of writing, Danzel 1912; Gelb 1963; Derrida 1976, 1978; de Certeau

media as the display of physical objects in reliquaries, "cabinets of curiosities," museums, zoological and botanical gardens, and the performance of rituals such as triumph, tribute, and obeisance (which enact the periphery's subordination to the center), writing as such has therefore been the chief vehicle of urban centers' cosmographic projects. To collect anomalies has usually meant to write about them: texts have been primary mediators between centers and peripheries, serving, like the cabinet of curiosities (ancestor of the modern public museum),⁴⁴ to display the marvels of the periphery. Texts have also been used to alter or undermine projects of collection. The questions are these: Why has writing been such a key cosmographic medium? Is there anything in its nature, beyond its obvious power as a mode of communication, that will shed light on its cosmographic function and thus on the nature of cosmography as a human enterprise? What difference does it make when a cosmographic tradition or genre is not oral or gestural but written?

We may begin to understand the cosmographic value of writing by recalling its nature as a human act. In an age in which words are increasingly stored as electromagnetic bits, we might easily forget that, first and foremost, to write something is to cut, scratch, draw, paint, impress, or otherwise mark a surface. The etymologies of many terms for writing reflect this.⁴⁵ But they only confirm a point that seems obvious upon reflection: among ways of communicating, it is peculiar to writing and other graphic and plastic media that they literally embody a message in some physical, external, usually durable form. Unlike speech or gesture or music, whose utterances perdure only as long as the performance continues, writing lifts its message from the flow of time by means of an objectivization in space.⁴⁶ My point is not that writing is used exclusively to bind its objects; it is rather that, in the first instance, especially early in its history wherever it has appeared, writing binds. It is therefore no surprise to find that, everywhere it has appeared, writing is used in "magical" practices whose purpose is to bind or

1975; Goody 1977, 1987; Diringer 1962; Hooke 1937, 1954; Friedrich 1937, 1938, 1941; Bertholet 1949.

44. von Schlosser 1908; Frese 1960; Lach 1965–1977, v.2, bk.1:7–55; Stocking 1985.

45. Gelb 1963, 7.

46. On the simultaneity of performance, Schutz 1977. On writing's objectifying function, Ong 1981 [1967] and 1982, esp. chaps. 4–5; Ricoeur 1976, 26–29; Gelb 1963, 7–9.

hinder the workings of some power, or to coerce it into effecting specific results.⁴⁷ The symbolic binding function of writing in most literate cultures is mirrored in the metaphoric use to which books and other written materials have been put: the image of the book or tablet frequently expresses ideas of fate, destiny, or divine judgment, and writing is a frequent metaphor for the psychological functions of sensory "impressions" and memory.

Ancient views of writing as having the power to bind or fix lie behind more recent and familiar developments. Such momentous events as the standardization of scripts by the state, the emergence of scriptural canons, the invention of the alphabet and (much later) of the printing press, are all complex expressions of the old view of writing as fixing. As scholars including Walter Ong, Jack Goody, Michel de Certeau, and Jacques Derrida have shown, writing lends itself to "fixing" objects of discourse by creating a uniform field of textual space and time in which they assume a definite place. The field of the text may take the form of a manuscript or printed page. It may collect its objects into a table or a list. It may display them in a map or cosmogram, embed them in a historical narrative, or unfold them in ethnographic or geographic formats.⁴⁸ Most triumphantly, it may aspire to enclose them once and for all in a complete "circle of knowledge" or *encyclopaedia*. In all these cases, granted the important differences among them, the fundamental act remains one of collecting and binding diverse data into a common and delimited field of display. Almost as long as writing has existed, however, some have resisted this binding function of writing, seeking to preserve or recover the reality that exists prior to or beyond inscription. This nostalgia for the oral is often part of a larger protest against the sort of locative cosmography for which writing had served as a medium.⁴⁹ In this sort of context, the unwritten comes to have special integrity as an undomesticated terrain in contrast to the closed, bound display of writing; the collection, once a "cabinet of curiosities" of cosmic import, now itself becomes a curious object; writing is used to undermine its own capacity to bind.

47. Audollent 1903, 1904; Naveh and Shaked 1985; Betz 1986; Thorndike 1928–58, v.2; Marquès-Rivière 1938; Piccaluga 1974, 1983.

48. On "field" narratives, Clifford and Marcus 1986; Marcus and Fischer 1986; Stocking 1983.

49. Plato's suspicion of writing: *Republic* 274b–276a; a Japanese parallel, Pollack 1986, 36; a Judaeo-Christian example, Boas 1948, 189, but cf. 191.

The difference between these two broad sorts of attitudes toward writing shows up clearly in traditions of *literary collecting*. In such traditions as folklore, ethnography, certain kinds of geographical writing, and most hagiography or sacred biography—which are not restricted to the Judaeo-Christian and Islamic West but have arisen in most cultures where literacy has developed—writers attempt to capture in writing something that is powerful precisely because of its separateness from writing. Each of these traditions depends on two apparently contradictory assumptions: on the one hand, that the modes of writing it employs constitute an adequate handle to grasp or fix the objects described, or in other words that these objects can be brought under the scope (or into the field) of the particular discipline of writing in question; on the other hand, that the object thus enmeshed in writing merits this attention because it has certain qualities that separate it off from the written tradition and from the ceremonial center, qualities that give it an integrity peculiar to the peripheral and to the unwritten. That which is perceived in the center as “savage,” as “peasant,” as “holy,” as “natural”—whether seen as noble or base—is written about in a text that, displaying these objects for central re-inspection, is at the same time often felt by authors and audience to be palpably distant from and inadequate to its object. “The exotic is always full of surprises; it delights and titillates. To domesticate it exhaustively would neutralize this aspect of its meaning and regretfully integrate it into the humdrum of everyday routines. The ideology of the exotic therefore stops short of an exhaustive interpretation.”⁵⁰

These are the sorts of considerations that have framed my inquiry into the Chinese texts introduced in the following chapter.

50. Foster 1982–83, 21–22.