Francis Bacon thought that the mind of man was “like an enchanted glass, full of superstition and imposture”.¹ His warning was never truer than in relation to cultural anthropology and ethnography. In the case of physical experiments and observations of the natural world the natural philosopher had only to take account of the superstitions and impostures of his own mind, but in observing societies there were, in addition, the distortions introduced by the mind of the traveller who wrote the report, as well as those of the people whom he had observed and who had given him the information he used. Human society is refracted through many enchanted glasses. Just how reliable as sources of anthropological information were the travel books that Locke read? Were they good ethnography?

Ethnography is the term often used for what has come to be the defining practice of twentieth century cultural anthropology—field work. It might be defined as the art and science of describing a society with the researcher becoming immersed in a culture for six months to a year² during which time the researcher is dependent for information on “key actors,” or informants within the society that is being studied.³ The choice of appropriate informants, the probability that they will have the kind of knowledge that the ethnographer needs, and above all their reliability as witnesses are all crucial to the entire project. It is on ethnographic studies of this type that twentieth century cultural anthropology, which makes a comparative synthesis of such studies, is based. Without reliable ethnographic material and reliable informants the whole edifice of anthropology as an intellectual discipline becomes insecure.

Locke’s travel books were like ethnographic informants in that they were the source of his information about other societies just as living

³ Ibid. 48.
people are for a modern anthropologist. If they misled him either deliberately or inadvertently, if they did not have access to the knowledge they pretended to have, through lack of language skills or because they relied on second-hand information, Locke’s anthropology would have been seriously flawed from the start because he did not have adequate ethnographic descriptions on which to base his comparisons. Early modern travel books such as those Locke used are particularly vulnerable to the charge that they are not objective accounts but largely fictional. In the opinion of one critic,

The authors of the anecdotes with which this book concerns itself were liars—few of them steady liars..., but frequent and cunning liars none the less, whose position virtually required the strategic manipulation and distortion and outright suppression of the truth.4

But modern social anthropology is not immune to the effect of Bacon’s enchanted mirror. The discipline has never entirely recovered from the shock it sustained when one of Margaret Mead’s Samoan informants, Fa’apua’a Fa’amu, publicly declared in 1988 that she had lied to Mead when the anthropologist was researching her classic work *Coming of Age in Samoa* some sixty years before.5 Reliability is not all on one side.

Many twentieth century anthropologists rank examples of early travel literature highly as sources of ethnographic knowledge.6 For the anthropologist Levi-Strauss, Léry’s account of the Tupinamba of Brazil could be considered “the anthropologist’s breviary.”7 Aspects of Léry’s description have been born out by later anthropological reports of indigenous Brazilian peoples, such as their elaborate feather ornaments, their green stone ear plugs and the welcome of tears with which they greeted visitors to their villages8 have been confirmed by later

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