

NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES

CLIFFORD JAMES GEERTZ
1926–2006

A Biographical Memoir by
RICHARD A. SHWEDER

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Biographical Memoir

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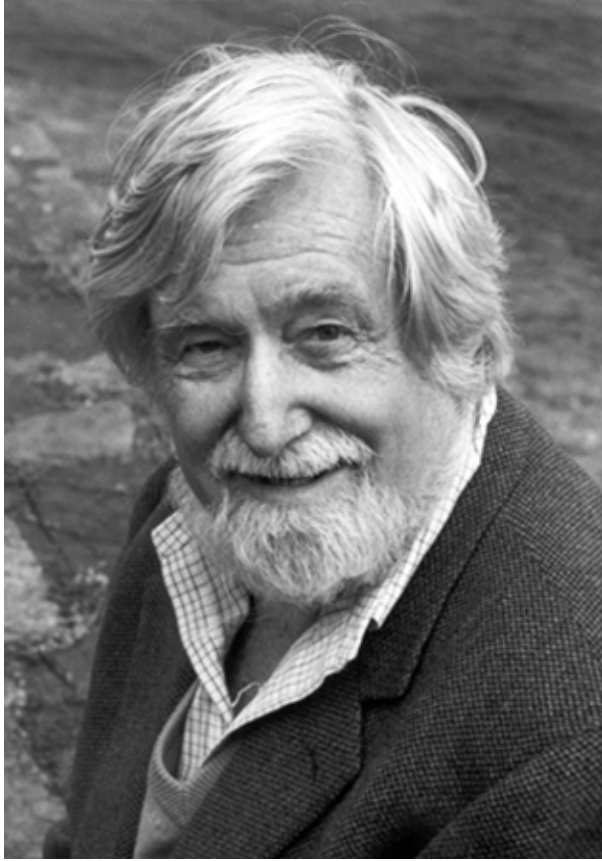


Photo by Mary Cross.

Ben Holt Gentry

CLIFFORD JAMES GEERTZ

August 23, 1926–October 30, 2006

BY RICHARD A. SHWEDER¹

CLIFFORD GEERTZ, PROFESSOR EMERITUS and the original founding member of the School of Social Sciences at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey, died on October 30, 2006, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, as a result of complications following heart surgery. He became a member of the National Academy of Sciences in 1973. Clifford Geertz was arguably the most influential American cultural anthropologist of the second half of the 20th century. He was an heir to a research tradition in American cultural anthropology that can be traced to Franz Boas, the founder of American anthropology, who was arguably the most influential cultural anthropologist of the first half of the 20th century. It is a research tradition grounded in long-term fieldwork in non-Western civilizations and small-scale societies. It is a research agenda focused on documenting and understanding diversity in local group-based customary behaviors and in the beliefs, values, symbols, and meanings associated with the “native point of view.” Through his writings on Indonesia, Morocco, religion, ideology, ritual, Islam, politics, the process of discerning the meanings of symbolic actions, and cultural pluralism Clifford Geertz gave definition to the more humanistic side of his discipline’s scholarly agenda. Indeed, his scholarly life might be viewed as an

evolving interpretive dance with the central epistemological and moral challenge faced by all cultural anthropologists. As he put it: how to penetrate a form of life not merely different from but incompatible with one's own.

Despite his obvious brilliance, literary skills, and intellectual energy, Clifford Geertz was a private man who became a public intellectual. He was a frequent contributor to the *New York Review of Books* where for three decades he was the voice of cultural anthropology to a cosmopolitan readership; his first essay, "Under the Mosquito Net," published on September 14, 1967, was not only a critical evaluation of the astonishing personal diary kept by the near legendary anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski in the years 1914-1918 during several years of fieldwork in New Guinea and the Trobriand Islands but also a glimpse of Cliff's epistemological interests, and ironical turn of mind. On the evidence of the diary Geertz judged the famous Polish ethnographer to be "a crabbed, self-preoccupied, hypochondriacal narcissist, whose fellow-feeling for the people he lived with was limited in the extreme." Yet, as he noted, Malinowski was "a great ethnographer, and, when one considers his place in time, one of the most accomplished that has yet appeared. That he was also apparently a disagreeable man thus poses something of a problem." How did Malinowski (detached, wishing he was in England, often contemptuous of the locals) manage to penetrate and achieve an insider's understanding of a form of life so apparently different from his own? "Does one ever really manage to do it?" and "How should one try to go about doing it?" were underlying philosophical and methodological questions for Cliff Geertz throughout his career. Clearly, as he noted in the first of his more than 20 essays in the *New York Review of Books*, you did not have to "go native," or even like the natives, to do it.

Clifford Geertz, himself the anthropologist who sought to understand different others, was an unpretentious, even somewhat introverted man, who was skittish and halting yet also riveting and dazzling in interpersonal encounters and whose company it was great fun to keep. Those who encountered him with any depth or frequency came to realize that he abhorred the use of theory-laden abstractions, disliked labels, and would have liked nothing better than to defy classification by colleagues and friends. Even as he (like Boas and Malinowski) became legendary in academic circles, in this instance for his verbal intelligence as well as for his research skills, he would surely never have thought of himself as a conversationalist. Nevertheless his capacity to produce spontaneous yet meticulously wrought and penetrating commentaries on almost any conceivable cultural theme, high or low, was widely acknowledged and delighted in throughout his many academic networks. And then, of course, there was his dexterity with dethroning witticisms (“relax and enjoy it ethnocentrism”) and entertaining deposing sallies (“If you want a *good* rule-of-thumb generalization from anthropology I would suggest the following: Any sentence that begins ‘All societies have...’ is either baseless or banal”) which was in evidence not only in his writings but also in informal conversation. I suspect he not only relished a good quip but also believed in the wisdom of a well-timed wise crack.

I recall a crack I once made about his literary style, which Cliff amusingly and wisely put to good use. On November 23, 2003, on the occasion of the celebration of the 100th anniversary of the American Anthropological Association, its Executive Board sponsored a presidential session honoring “The Work and Life of Clifford Geertz.” Over the course of a full afternoon Cliff patiently and attentively listened to former students and colleagues from around the world appraise his influence and critique his theories; then he rose to offer a

response. Aware that many readers of his work fixate upon or get sidetracked by his writing style (the labyrinthine clause embeddings, high-strung hedges, elaborate digressions, and subtle qualifications, all part of the rhetorical apparatus expressive of his fondness for the cerebral equivalent of interpretive dancing, both with and around a topic), I had playfully likened his writing style to Cyrano de Bergerac's nose: "It is conspicuous, it is spectacular, but it is best to just ignore it, for sake of getting on with a discussion of his ideas." Cliff responded,

[L]et me extend this notion that much of the "judgin" that takes place in my work comes less in terms of explicit verdicts than through passing comments, insinuate phrases, over-the-shoulder, curve-ball tones of voice and the like, by taking issue with his recommendation that the best thing to do about my writing style is to "to ignore it for the sake of getting on with a discussion of his ideas"...I do this not to defend my style (or styles) as such. Having toiled over it for so many years, I am quite aware of its deficiencies, and if I am not there is always a reviewer to remind me...I do it to question whether style and substance are so easily separable in such matters. Cyrano without his nose is, after all, not Cyrano, but just another hapless fop orating to a balcony. It is his style, and the pain that inhabits it, that makes him into a great romantic figure. I do not claim to be that, at least not in public. But I do think that much of what I have to say inheres in how I say it, and that this is especially true when it comes to deciding about issues of judgment. To make up a Yogi Berra-ism: you can say a lot just by writing.

Cliff fully developed that rhetorical theme (or substantive theory of rhetoric) in his book *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author* (1988). There he analyzed the literary forms of several anthropological notables (Bronislaw Malinowski, Ruth Benedict, Claude Levi-Strauss, E. E. Evans-Pritchard and others), writing stylishly (in defense of style) that "the way of saying" is "the what of saying." As always he built up his case by example, revealing the literary devices used by successful anthropological authors to portray or depict their native realities.

Nevertheless, with due respect for Cliff's love of over-the-shoulder commentary and irresolution, fully cognizant of his desire not to be pinned down, and braving all the objections I can imagine him launching against any attempt to place his work and life into academic pigeonholes, I am going to undertake a discussion of his ideas. I think it is fair to say that he was a robust cultural pluralist who was suspicious of all grand and sweeping theories of human behavior. He believed that cultural diversity was inherent in the human condition and that the ecumenical or missionary impulse to value uniformity over variety and to overlook, devalue, or even eradicate difference was not a good thing. Based on his reading of history and his ethnographic knowledge of the current global multicultural scene he viewed it as evident that cultural differences between groups—sustained by powerful origin stories, historical narratives, religious symbols, and imagined primordial ties to one's own ancestral spirits—are ever present, robust, and resilient.

He was not inclined to interpret the fact of a “differenced world” as a measure of the error, ignorance, or confusion of “others” (the heathens, the savages, the barbarians, the underdeveloped or primitive peoples of the world). He was far more inclined to view the diversity of ideas, ideals, and practices of the many peoples of the world as an expression of the creative imagination of cultural communities in the face of the limits of reason and the demands of the human existential condition for answers to such questions as what is me and what is not me, what is female and what is male, what is our way and what is not our way, how should burdens and benefits be distributed among members of our group, etc. In a famous Distinguished Lecture, “Anti Anti-Relativism” delivered in 1983 to the members of the American Anthropological Association, Cliff offers this quote from Montaigne: “Each man calls barbarism whatever is not his own practice...for

we have no other criterion of reason than the example and idea of the opinions and customs of the country we live in.” Cliff goes on to remark: “That notion, whatever its problems, and however more delicately expressed, is not likely to go entirely away unless anthropology does.”

Although Clifford Geertz described himself as an “anti anti-relativist,” he was not himself a radical relativist, although despite the care and fastidiousness with which he articulated his views, he was often mistakenly labeled as such. Quite the contrary, he believed that “relativism disables judgment,” just as he believed that “absolutism” removes judgment from history. He believed in critical judgment, but only when it did not pretend to be context free. He was however quite wary of the hazards of parochialism and ethnocentrism, for as he put it, he did not want our perceptions to be dulled, our intellects constricted, or our sympathies narrowed “by the overlearned and overvalued acceptances of our own society.”

Indeed, when Clifford Geertz took the measure of primordial group identities, anxieties, hostilities, and fears in the contemporary world, and the associated political disorder, his assessment of various extant multicultural realities (domestic and global) was not pretty. His words (and critical judgment) on this matter are haunting: “The image of a world full of people so passionately fond of each other’s cultures that they aspire only to celebrate one another does not seem to me a clear and present danger,” he wrote. “The image of one full of people happily apotheosizing their heroes and diabolizing their enemies alas does.”

He was mindful that we live in an age when political and marketplace transactions (including competition for jobs, land, natural resources), both domestic and international, produce fateful (and sometimes destructive) encounters between members of ancestrally distinct groups, resulting in

the mutual demonizing of the “other.” “Positioning Muslims in France, whites in South Africa, Arabs in Israel, or Koreans in Japan are not altogether the same sort of thing,” he noted, “but if political theory is going to be of any relevance at all in the splintered world, it will have to have something cogent to say about how, in the face of a drive towards a destructive integrity, such structures can be brought into being, how they can be sustained, and how they can be made to work.”

These are many well-known facts about Cliff’s career. His collection of essays *Available Light* (2000) opens with an autobiographical address, “Passage and Accident: A Life of Learning,” delivered to the American Council of Learned Societies in 1999. The GI bill (which he refers to, with characteristic wit, as the “degreeing of America”) launched him into academia where, as he puts it, he just kept catching the right wave. He went from Antioch College (“the reigning attitude, Jewish, all irony, impatience and auto-critique”), to the Department of Social Relations at Harvard (“a gathering of fugitives from traditional departments”), to the University of Chicago where he became a major voice of the symbolic or interpretive anthropology movement of the 1960s. For an instructive collection of his essays in symbolic or interpretive anthropology, which stands as the culmination of his Chicago era thinking, and where he first made use of the expression “thick description” with which his style of ethnographic writing is associated, one need only read his book *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973). He intended that title as an allusion to Sigmund Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams*. He later published further essays in interpretive anthropology under the title *Local Knowledge* (1983).

In the discourse of symbolic or interpretive anthropology a symbol is anything—an action, a practice, an object, a pattern of sounds, a cremation ceremony, the gathering together of people to share a meal—that is a vehicle of meaning. The

goal of interpretive analysis is to spell out the implicit or unstated presuppositions, implications, or “meanings” (the goals, values, and pictures of the world) that make this or that action, practice, object, or pattern of sounds intelligible to members of some culture or interpretive community in some specified context. “Thick description” is the process of spelling out the context-dependent meanings of, for example, a specific action or activity such as the Balinese cockfight. (One of Cliff’s most famous essays is “Deep Play: Notes on a Balinese Cockfight” [1971]). In other words, for Geertz, human beings not only do things with words they also say things with their actions; and that is what makes the (particular) lives they led symbolic. His symbolic anthropology is thus about the interpretative analysis of behavior by reference to ideas or concepts made manifest or expressed through action.

Always a fugitive from every academic pigeonhole, Cliff felt most at home during his University of Chicago years in the interdisciplinary Committee on the Comparative Study of New Nations, which he helped put on the map during the 1960s. Several of his most seminal papers, including “Religion as a Cultural System” (1966), “The Impact of the Concept of Culture on the Concept of Man” (1966), and “The Integrative Revolution: Primordial Sentiments and Civil Politics in the New States” (1963) were written during this time.

The next and final wave he caught was to the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey, where in 1970 he helped found the School of Social Sciences and became the cultural anthropologist in residence. During several productive decades at the institute, he engaged with historians, philosophers, legal scholars, and literary critics. And he wrote many influential books, including *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia* (1968), *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth Century Bali*. (1980), and *Works*

and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author (1988). He retired as professor emeritus at the institute in 2000 and remained in situ until his death.

In a commentary published not long before his death Cliff gives an account of his life more personal (and more revealing of his youthful years) than the one in his autobiographical address to the American Council of Learned Societies. He portrays his work and life as “a looking for small bits of order to hang onto in the midst of chaos.” He writes:

So it is hardly to wonder that my work looks like a grasping for patterns in a swirl of change: I was preadapted. My parents were divorced when I was three, and I was dispatched (the verb is appropriate) to live alone with an older woman, a nonrelative, amid the sylvan beauties of the Northern California countryside (a “nonvillage” of three or four hundred farmers, shopkeepers, and summer visitors) [he is speaking of an area in Marin County] in the plumb depths of the Great Depression. I was well cared for, and that’s about it, and I was pretty much left to put my life together (not without real help from schoolteachers responding to a bright kid, and, later on, the U.S. Navy, responding to a callow klutz) by myself. Without going on . . . all this predisposed me to becoming, in both life and work, the seeker after a pattern, however fragmentary, amid a swirl of accident, however pervasive. . . . It has never occurred to me, not really being a deep thinker, just a nervous one, to try to resolve this “binary.” I have just sought to live with it. Pitched early into things, I assumed, and I still assume, that what you are supposed to do is keep going with whatever you can find lying about to keep going with: to get from yesterday to today without foreclosing tomorrow.

In some of his most well-known work Cliff Geertz searched for patterns by conducting field work in Indonesia (at sites in Bali, Java, and Sumatra) and in Morocco. Early in his career and again during the last decade of his life, he tried to make sense out of the complex and chaotic relationships between globalization and the revitalization of local “primordial” identities in a world “growing both more global and more divided, more thoroughly interconnected and more intricately partitioned, at the same time.”

What he accomplished in this regard was concrete and substantial. He helped us imagine how it is possible for morally sensitive and intellectually reasonable members of the divergent cultural lineages in the human family to live their lives guided by goals, values, and pictures of the world very different from our own. His writings sought to show us how it is possible for normal members of other cultural worlds or nations to live their lives piloted by different conceptions of the self, of gender, of morality, of emotions, of religion, of political and legal authority, of property, of kinship, even different conceptions of time, space, causation, and the good life.

One of his most provocative (or at least one of his most controversial) propositions appeared in an essay titled "On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding" (1975, p. 48), in which he suggested that

the Western conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgment, and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively both against other such wholes and against a social and natural background is, however incorrigible it may seem to us, a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world's cultures.

Thirty-five years later the extent to which that conception of the person is or is not corrigible (and hence is or is not capable of cross-cultural variation) continues to be debated in the social science literature.

Clifford Geertz's version of cultural pluralism was one in which he sought to understand others as coequal moral subjects (rather than as defective moral subjects or as mere objects); and to do so without assuming that if two cultural traditions are moral equals then their goals, values, pictures of the world, and ways of life must be uniform or essentially the same. He sought to do this while fully recognizing there may be times when tolerance comes to an end. His work thus

stands in contrast to those traditions of scholarship that either view the variety of human societies as a developmental story about the ultimate universal ascendancy of Western civilization or else have little interest in the cultural and historical variety in the first place, and try instead to induce essential laws of human nature that hold across all of history and all known societies.

But Clifford Geertz was not only a robust cultural pluralist. He was also a political liberal, although a nervous one, who was aware that a major cause of what he called the “drive towards a destructive integrity” in the modern world was the ethno-nationalist impulse to disaggregate or dismantle multicultural states and resolve them into a world of political communities in which nation, people, state, and country—culture and politics—are made to coincide. Exercising his critical judgment he once described resistance to ethno-nationalism as a “moral imperative.” Not very far from the surface of his writings on this subject was his clear and considered judgment about the worthiness of a distinctively American political conception of nationality: a conception of the nation as a “civil political community.” In that conception all people—regardless of their ethnic, racial, or religious origins—who are citizens of the state and are willing to live their lives constrained by a basic set of liberal democratic principles (what Geertz described as the “law, government and public comportment”) are part of the nation.

Geertz, however, was acutely aware that critics of political liberalism around the world often argue that liberals (including Geertz himself) are prevented precisely because of their liberal commitments (for example, to the ideals of autonomy, equal life chances, and the freedoms of expression, association, and choice) from celebrating (or from even tolerating) cultural differences, especially when those cultural divides or separations are sustained by means of primordial

ties to ancestral groups. As a robust cultural pluralist and a dedicated political liberal he found it troubling to see such critics argue, as he put it in one brief but effective summary of their views, that political liberals are barred by their own liberal principles “from recognizing the force and durability of ties of religion, language, custom, locality, race, and descent in human affairs, or from regarding the entry of such considerations into civic life as other than pathological—primitive, backward, regressive, and irrational.”

So he offered up a challenge: Can anthropologists, political philosophers, and globalization theorists develop a version of liberalism with both the courage and the capacity to engage itself with “a differenced world”? And can they do so with regard to, and respect for, a multicultural world in which at least some of that diversity has its source in the primordial ties of individuals to kith and kin and particular ancestral histories, and not in some original autobiographical act of free choice or expressive liberty?

Cliff Geertz died before he was able to fully spell out his own affirmative response to his own questions. Nevertheless, in some ways his most significant legacy is his invitation to those of us for whom his voice was resonant to rethink the implications of political liberalism. It is a summons to search for a practical philosophical antidote to the “diabolizing” of others and, thus, to develop a way of thinking about the reality and organization of ethnic, religious, and racial differences in the contemporary world which, even though it might fall short of getting us to actually celebrate diversity, might at the very least support an attitude of cooperative mutual sufferance among culturally distinct groups. I have no doubt that Cliff would critically judge that attitude of mutual sufferance to be a great achievement.

Clifford Geertz is survived by his wife, Karen Blu, a cultural anthropologist he married in 1987. He is survived as well

by his first wife, Hildred Geertz, (also a well-known anthropologist) who is professor emeritus in the Department of Anthropology at Princeton University and collaborated with him in his work on Indonesia; and by two children from his first marriage, Erika Reading of Princeton, and Benjamin, of Kirkland, Washington; and two grandchildren.

An engaging autobiographical interview with Clifford Geertz conducted on May 6, 2004, is available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3dQDx3axrDs>. Clifford Geertz's curriculum vitae, including a list of his publications as of August 2002, is available at http://www.infoamerica.org/documentos_pdf/geertz02.pdf. For a complete bibliography together with translations and reprints, see Mörth, I. and G. Fröhlich, *HyperGeertz World Catalogue*, <http://www.iwp.uni-linz.ac.at/lxe/sektkf/gg/HyperGeertz.html>.

CHRONOLOGY

1926	Born August 23 in San Francisco, California
1950	B.A. in philosophy from Antioch College
1952-1956	Research assistant, Center for International Studies, Massachusetts Institute of Technology
1956	Ph.D. in social relations (anthropology) from Harvard University
1956-1957	Instructor in social relations and research associate in the Laboratory of Social Relations, Harvard University
1957-1958	Research associate, Center for International Studies, Massachusetts Institute of Technology
1958-1959	Fellow, Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, Stanford, California
1958-1960	Assistant professor of anthropology, University of California, Berkeley
1960-1970	Assistant professor of anthropology, University of Chicago, 1960-1961; Associate professor, 1962-1964; Professor 1964-1968; Divisional professor in the social sciences, 1968-1970.

- 1962-1970 Member of the Committee for the Comparative Study of New Nations, University of Chicago, 1962-1970; Executive Secretary, 1964-1966; Chairman, 1968-1970.
- 1964-1970 Senior research career fellow, National Institute of Mental Health
- 1971 Consultant to the Ford Foundation on social sciences in Indonesia
- 1970-2006 Professor of social science, Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, New Jersey (Harold F. Linder Professor of Social Science, 1982-2000); Professor emeritus, 2000-2008
- 1978-1979 Eastman Professor, Oxford University
- 1975- Visiting lecturer with rank of professor, Department of History, Princeton University

FIELDWORK

- Java, Indonesia 1952-1954; Apr. 1984; Mar.-Aug. 1986. Nov.-Dec. 1999
- Bali, Indonesia 1957-1958
- Morocco Jun.-Jul. 1963; Jun.-Dec. 1964; Jun. 1965-Sept. 1966; Jun. 1968-Apr. 1969; Jun.-Jul. 1972; Jun.-Jul. 1976; Nov. 1985-Mar. 1986
- Java, Bali, Celebes, Sumatra Apr.-Sept. 1971

HONORARY DEGREES

- Honorary Doctor of Law, Harvard University, 1974
- Honorary Doctor of Humane Letters: Northern Michigan University, 1975; University of Chicago, 1979; Bates College, 1980; Knox College (Illinois), 1982; Brandeis University, 1984; Swarthmore College, 1984; New School for Social Research, 1987; Princeton University, 1995
- Honorary Doctor of Social Science, Yale University, 1987
- Honorary Doctor of Letters, Williams College, 1991; University of Cambridge, 1997; Georgetown University, 1998; Antioch College 1999

SCHOLARLY AWARDS

Social Science Prize (Talcott Parsons Prize), American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1974
Sorokin Prize, American Sociological Association, 1974
Distinguished Lecturer, American Anthropological Association, 1983
Huxley Memorial Lecturer and Medallist, Royal Anthropological Institute, 1983
Distinguished Scholar Award, Association for Asian Studies, 1987
National Book Critics Circle Prize in Criticism, 1988
Horace Mann Distinguished Alumnus Award, Antioch College, 1992
Fukuoka Asian Cultural Prize (Academic, International), 1992

SCHOLARLY MEMBERSHIPS

Fellow, American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1966
Fellow, Council on Foreign Relations, 1970
Fellow, American Philosophical Society, 1972
Member, The National Academy of Sciences, 1973
Fellow, American Association for the Advancement of Science, 1980
Corresponding Fellow, The British Academy, 1991
Honorary Fellow, The Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, 1995

LECTURESHIPS

Terry Lecturer, Yale University, 1967
Harry F. Camp Memorial Lecturer, Stanford University, 1972
John Dewey Lecturer, Antioch College, 1973
Lionel Trilling Lecturer, Columbia University, 1977
Storrs Lecturer, Yale Law School, 1981
Bicentennial Lecturer, American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1981
Harry F. Camp Memorial Lecturer, Stanford University, 1983
Obert C. Tanner Lecturer, University of Michigan, 1985
Lindesmith Lecturer, Carleton College, 1990
Hitchcock Lecturer, University of California, 1990
Harvard-Jerusalem Lecturer, 1990

Hardy Lecturer, Hartwick College, 1992
Fukuoka Five-Year Anniversary Lecturer, Tokyo and Fukuoka, 1995
Lecturer in Modern Philosophy, Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen, Vienna, 1995
William James Lecturer, Harvard Divinity School, 1998
Wells Lecturer, University of Indiana, 1998
Charles Homer Haskins Lecturer, American Council of Learned Societies, 1999
Master's Seminar, University of Konstanz, 2000
Sabbagh Lecturer, University of Arizona, 2001

OTHER HONORS

Council of Scholars, Library of Congress, 1982-1993
Fellow, Intellectual Interchange Program, Japan Society, 1984
Visiting Fellow, Humanities Research Centre, Australian National University, 1987
Rector's Visitor, Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, Germany, 1993
Visiting Professor, European University Institute, Florence, Italy, 1994
Visiting Scholar, L'École des hautes études en sciences sociales (EHESS), Paris, 1994
Visiting Scholar, Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1998

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1959

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NOTES

1. This biographical memoir selectively expands upon, revisits and recapitulates themes, memories and descriptions of the life and work of Cliff Geertz that have appeared in two other memorial essays, one titled “The Resolute Irresolution of Clifford Geertz” written for the journal of *Common Knowledge* (2007) and the other prepared for the *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* (2010).