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FOREWORD

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Michael Agar was an anthropologist's anthropologist. I mean that in a double sense. He was deeply committed to fieldwork based on attentive listening and close observation of people in their everyday social worlds. He also relentlessly questioned the moral meaning of his own vocation, subjecting anthropology's practices to the same attention he brought to the lives of the people he wrote about with memorable vividness.

Although I had followed his work for decades and sometimes assigned his book *The Professional Stranger* to my undergraduate students at Williams College, I came to know him only after taking a new job as president of the School for Advanced Research, a century-old center for research in anthropology, archaeology, and Native American arts in Santa Fe. Mike and I found common cause in our professional passions, leading to memorable discussions, occasionally lubricated by pints of IPA, about everything from the social dynamics of managing water

time embracing a specific history. Whether we recognize it or not, Agar insists, social research involves entering into a relationship with our subjects, an awareness of which must be part of the analysis itself.

Yet despite this difference between the physical sciences and human social research—referred to throughout the book by the acronym HSR—Agar makes a strong case that the best HSR qualifies as science because it is systematic and committed to the presentation of verifiable evidence. As he puts it, HSR must "make a case based on evidence, logic, and falsification with a transparency that allows critical evaluation." "More than one conclusion is possible," he says elsewhere in the book, "but not all conclusions are acceptable."

In making a case for the scientific basis of HSR, *The Lively Science* takes readers on an unusual journey through the history of ideas. Agar finds philosophical justification for the superiority of qualitative social research in the work of thinkers rarely mentioned during my professional training and, I suspect, in that of most social scientists. These pivotal figures include Franz Brentano, Wilhelm Dilthey, and Stephen Toulmin, among others. Thanks to Agar's disarmingly conversational style, this excursion into Western intellectual history is anything but dry. The case studies used to exemplify key points run the gamut from the unexpectedly vehicular—for example, assessing the social forces that led him to choose a Subaru as his personal vehicle—to flirtations with pop culture, as when he cites the protagonist of the long-running detective series *Columbo* as a practitioner of "abductive logic," a form of nonlinear reasoning identified by the philosopher Charles Peirce.

Mike Agar's life was cut short by an incurable neurological disease, a terrible loss for the disciplines that he loved, anthropology and linguistics, and for any field committed to study of what he referred to as the "messiness" of human social life. Fortunately for us, the voice of this unusual thinker—

insightful, self-aware, irreverent—echoes throughout the book. I expect that it will alter the career paths of more than a few young scholars dissatisfied by forms of behavioral social science wedded to the pretense that investigators live outside the life-worlds of the people they study. This, then, is a book for those who want to learn more about "the space that a human social world might travel, more about paths not taken and possible paths it might take in the future," as Agar puts it. *The Lively Science* stands as a peerless meditation on the mission, methods, and world-changing potential of human social research.