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Beyond Modernity's Meanings: Engaging the Postmodern in Cultural Anthropology

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Article abstract

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Beyond Modernity's Meanings: Engaging the Postmodern in Cultural Anthropology

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Drawing upon literature in cultural studies, the author argues that the concept of the postmodern challenges the discipline of cultural anthropology in a number of ways. Interpretive anthropology is a modernist enterprise — one with untenable premises and limitations that are increasingly evident in the condition of postmodernity. Exploring the intersections between culture and power in local contexts, cultural anthropologists engage the postmodern by investigating the cultural politics of everyday life.

En tirant les conséquences des études culturelles, l'auteur constate que le concept du postmodernisme met à l'épreuve l'ethnologie de plusieurs manières. L'ethnologie interprétative est une entreprise de modernité — comportant des prémisses et des limitations insoutenables qui sont de plus en plus évidentes dans la condition de postmodernité. Par l'exploration des intersections entre la culture et le pouvoir dans des contextes locaux, l'ethnologie appréhende le postmoderne par une investigation des politiques culturelles de la vie quotidienne.

The term postmodern is ubiquitous and its referents so various that many cultural anthropologists are inclined to dismiss it as a rhetorical fashion that addresses no substantive topic or perspective. Those in our discipline who do employ the term are generally concerned with issues of ethnographic representation.¹ Drawing upon a growing literature in cultural studies (Jameson 1991; Bauman 1988; Connor 1989; Featherstone 1988, 1991; Kellner 1988; Turner 1990), I will argue that the concept of the postmodern speaks to cultural anthropology in other, more diverse and more provocative ways. I suggest that cultural anthropology, in its "interpretive," "symbolic," or "hermeneutic" guises, is a modernist enterprise that is challenged both by the premises of postmodernist scholars, and by the historical conditions of postmodernity. The growing discourse on postmodernism enables us to see some of the limitations of our practices and points to new avenues for critical cultural research. There are approaches to considering cultural phenomena that may be considered postmodernist in their orientation, and there are cultural practices characteristic of the historical period known as the postmodern era (Harvey 1989; Jameson 1991). Both, I suggest, pose challenges to interpretive anthropology and open up new fields of critical inquiry.

The postmodern is clearly related historically (and sometimes oppositionally) to the modern or the condition of modernity with which, I will claim, the tradition of cultural anthropology is closely tied. Modernity, or the process of modernization is understood to be marked by the collapse of feudal and religious social orderings, and by socioeconomic differentiation, rationalization, urbanization and industrialization. The European intellectual enterprise associated with these developments is that of the Enlightenment — defining the elements of a purportedly universal rationality. In the study of individual and social life, this involved a search for objective governing laws similar in character to those conceived for the physical universe.

The Enlightenment enterprise was not, however, monolithic. Dominant discourses inspired counter-discourses which rejected the Kantian tradition of epistemology, metaphysics and objectivism as the sole arbiter of truth, in favor of an exploration of the hermeneutic and intersubjective nature of social life and understanding. This counter-tradition insisted that no knowledge could claim the status of universal truth because knowledge itself was a product of specific social, historical, and cultural contexts. We might also consider Heidegger, Wittgenstein and Merleau Ponty, but the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer had the most lasting influence on the norms of cultural anthropology. Viewing comprehension as symbolically mediated, socially situated interpretation, rather than the logical deductions of a transcendental Cartesian ego, he valorised cultural tradition as the primary enabling condition for human knowledge and communication.

Emerging as an alternative tradition within the dominant discursive sphere of modernity, the hermeneutic project was still one that engaged in the Enlightenment quest to develop the domains of art, science, and ethics according to their own immanent logics. Separating art and culture from the quotidian life of political struggle, this endeavour reified culture as a unified, holistic, and autonomous realm of meaning (Brenkman 1987; Caputo 1987; Collins 1989; Foster 1983). Within modernity's discourses, culture (whether a form of life or Western canonical tradition) was represented as a source of meanings and values, estranged from, but necessary to give significance to political and economic life. Often it is suggested that the desire to posit "culture" as a realm of universal and timeless value was part of the bourgeoisie's

ideological quest to consolidate and legitimate its social power (Brenkman 1987:42).

Gadamer's cultural hermeneutics might be seen as an antecedent theoretical rationalization of this class project (and hermeneutic anthropology understood as the Western bourgeoisie's extension of the privilege to define legitimate cultural meanings to other male elites in colonial and post-colonial societies). This may be clarified by an elaboration of the hermeneutic conceptualization of cultural tradition. "Cultures" and "traditions" are depicted as integrated systems of meaning — a depiction enabled by the elision of the social and political practices in which meanings and texts are produced. Social relations of production and interpretation are emptied of specificity so that those who produce and interpret meanings have no class, gender, race, or age characteristics or sites from which they might have social interests and agendas that influence their meaning-making practices.

Interpretive processes are represented without reference to cultural differences, social inequalities, and conflicts within communities (Brenkman 1987:30-38). The dialogic, contested dimensions of social life are evaded by a focus on **dominant** interpretations as the univocal voice of **legitimate** meanings and values.

Traditional hermeneutics actively constructs cultural tradition in the guise of a unified realm of meanings and values separated from social relations of domination and power" (Brenkman 1987:viii).

This bourgeois concept of culture influenced cultural anthropology until quite recently. In the anthropological tradition, the hermeneutic approach involves the discovery and description of the life-worlds in which phenomena have significance or meaning — as Clifford Geertz put it, "placing things in local frames of awareness" (1983:6). We understand others in terms of a context, a web of significance often referred to as a system of shared meanings, and our own systems of meaning inevitably shape (and, hopefully, are shaped by) these understandings.

While interpretive anthropologists did reject the universalist pretensions of modernity in order to to posit and celebrate the plurality and diversity of human cultural life, they still maintained a modernist elite esthetic. Renato Rosaldo quotes Cora DuBois's comment on the current "crisis" in anthropology: "It has been like moving from a distinguished art museum into a garage sale" (1989:44). The art museum,

suggests Rosaldo, is an apt image for a field of intellectual endeavour that privileges “classic ethnographies” — works that represent “cultures” as autonomous, integrated, and aesthetically arranged wholes:

Cultures stand as sacred images; they have an integrity and coherence that enables them to be studied as they say, on their own terms, from within, from the ‘native’ point of view... [Like the work in an art museum] each culture stands alone as an aesthetic object.... Once canonized all cultures appear to be equally great.... Just as [one] does not argue whether Shakespeare is greater than Dante [one] does not debate the relative merits of the Kwakiutl... versus the Trobriand Islanders... (Rosaldo 1989:43).

The egalitarian and pluralist ethos that depicts cultures as separate and equal does not prevent anthropological norms from sharing with traditional hermeneutics an idealist comprehension of cultural tradition. In its “classical” forms cultural anthropology recognized, respected, even celebrated differences between cultures but effaced differences within cultures. Shared patterns are emphasized at the expense of internal inconsistencies, conflicts, and contradictions.² Defining culture as shared meanings, zones of difference — the social sites of age, status, class, race, gender and ethnicity where alternative meanings are articulated and dominant meanings contested³ — appear as aggravating anomalies rather than fruitful areas of inquiry (Rosaldo 1989:27-30; Roseberry 1989:24-25, Stoller 1989:56-68). Defining it as system or text, anthropologists extract culture from the practices of its creation and the agents of its construction. Cultures become defined by their internal homogeneity and the characteristics that distinguish them from other cultural wholes (Rosaldo 1989:202; Roseberry 1989:11; Coombe 1990b).

Like those engaged in cultural studies in other disciplines, anthropologists must address the differential (and differentiating) processes at play within the creation of cultural traditions and the disappearance of boundaries between those entities we once identified as discrete cultures. As James Clifford asserts, “Culture is contested, temporal, and emergent . . . [one cannot] occupy, unambiguously, a bounded cultural world from which to journey out and analyse other cultures. Human ways of life increasingly influence, dominate, parody, translate, and subvert one another” (Clifford 1986:19, 22).

Culture does not exist above or beyond social difference, inequality, domination, subjection and exploitation. It is both their medium and consequence, their inscription and the means of their social and psychological imbrication. Power is maintained and contested symbolically in social fields defined in discourse. Cultural interpretation maintains its independence (and social irresponsibility) insofar as it separates the symbolic from the political and creates the fiction of a monological cultural tradition unified by “shared” meanings. This evades (and is complicit with) the historically specific processes through which some meanings are privileged while others are delegitimated or denied voice — practices in which unity is forged from difference by the exclusion, marginalization and silencing of alternative visions and oppositional understandings. Culture needs to be understood as an activity of struggle rather than a thing, as conflictual signifying practices rather than integrated systems of meaning. In other words, a hermeneutic anthropology must explore the signifying practices that construct, maintain, and transform multiple hegemonies.⁴

Feminist anthropologists demonstrate that the representation of culture as a unified system of meaning is achieved primarily by excluding the cultural meanings that women and other subordinate groups in society attribute to their own experiences. Cultural truths are partial; they are often based upon institutional and contestable exclusions. Ethnographers have too often interpreted native elite male assertions and activities to metonymically represent social reality. In opposition, feminists assert an analytical attitude that “treats culture as contested rather than shared, and therefore represents social practice more as an argument than as a conversation” (Lederman 1989:230). For example, Rena Lederman (1989) criticizes a dominant tendency in ethnographic work on the New Guinea Highlands that represents these societies in terms of male dominated clan relationships, giving the exchange networks in which women are prominently involved secondary or negligible significance. Such an emphasis does not represent these societies as effectively as it echoes and gives legitimacy to a specific, interested indigenous perspective — an ideology of male dominance — that is contested by women and disputable even between men.

The ethnographic representation of Mediterranean societies as unified by the cultural honour/shame complex is similarly effected by a failure to

acknowledge the differential meanings given to these values by those in different social positions (Coombe 1990a). Along the same lines, Nicole Polier and William Roseberry (1989) assert that among the Solomon Islands Kwaio, ancestral custom is an arena of ongoing negotiation, in which women question authoritative definitions within a field of meaning traditionally understood as the legitimate preserve of male elders. Janice Boddy (1989), also suggests that women simultaneously reproduce and rework dominant Islamic meanings in *zar* possession cults; she contests the erroneous but common assumption that culture in northern Sudan is a monolithic, masculine preserve. She explores differential female and male readings of infibulation in Hofreyat (Boddy n.d.), indicting the reductionism of accounts that merely recount those meanings that the powerful bestow upon culturally salient practices.

If differences within cultures are becoming more apparent, or finally being articulated by anthropologists with new agendas, differences between cultures simultaneously proliferate and evade location. The inadequacy of cultural anthropology's attempts to demarcate rigid cultural boundaries around discrete populations, given their historical connections with others and with global currents has been suggested by political economists doing historical studies during the last decade (Wolf 1982; Mintz 1985; Roseberry 1989). As Rosaldo (1989) muses, the borderlands separating and joining cultures are multiplying; metropolises around the world include (and often contain) "minorities" differentiated by ethnicity, class, religion and sexual orientation. Encounters with difference are now pervasive as the Third World implodes into the urban centres of the metropolis (Koptiuch 1992). Cultures are not sealed and cultural heritages in contemporary contexts are actively constructed from competing concepts and new ideas about tradition (for one example see Borofsky 1987).

Cultural anthropology's modernist heritage — the desire to project cultures as bounded, coherent fields of shared meaning that may be internally explored — faces its demise in the complex cultural context of a post-colonial era increasingly dominated by a multinational global economy. At this historical juncture, cultural anthropologists might explore the resources afforded by a growing scholarship that considers the "postmodern condition." Academic discussions of postmodernism proceed on two fronts. First, they endeavour to develop an

approach to cultural phenomena that challenges the limitations of modernist discourse. Secondly an object of study or field of research is demarcated — "postmodernism" — the cultural forms, activities, and practices of late, global, or post-industrial capitalism. Each of these departures will be considered in turn.

The postmodernist position is one that contests or debates the continued value of the universalist premises and inclinations of modernity's dominant discourses (Ross 1988:vii). I hesitate to say that the postmodern rejects "modernism" because the latter term refers to an aesthetic movement (Cubists, Surrealists, Futurists, Constructivists, etc.) that considered itself oppositionally positioned with respect to modernity. It could indeed be suggested that postmodern social theory is the belated acknowledgment of aesthetic modernism's central premises in the field of social analysis. Such premises include self conscious reflexivity and a consideration of the ambiguous, paradoxical, and open-ended nature of social experience. It also involves a rejection of the concept of an integrated personality in favour of an exploration of the prolific cultural interpellations that produce a conflicted, de-centred, and creative subjectivity.

The cultural construction of identity, self, and emotion and the specificity of these concepts to cultural context is a primary anthropological insight (Geertz 1983:55-70). A postmodernist perspective suggests only that we go further than explaining Javanese, Balinese, or Moroccan styles of self and explore multiple and often contradictory cultural interpellations (such as those of religion, gender, and media) in the construction of internally polymorphous selves (Coombe 1989; Smith 1988b; Weedon 1987), and the provision of cultural resources for identity creation (Butler 1990; Coombe n.d.(1); 1992a; 1992c; Friedman 1991).

Most early dialogue employing the concept of the postmodern was concerned with the continuing social value of Enlightenment philosophical traditions. Lyotard, Rorty, Derrida, and Foucault engaged in critiques of the Cartesian Kantian tradition, asserting the pernicious impossibility of grandiose European desires to define foundational truths that would guarantee the legitimacy of political and intellectual practices. In debates with Jurgen Habermas, who seeks to preserve the project of modernity, they diffused the term "postmodern" as a reproof of universal reason and a challenge to the legitimating

myths of modernity. They posited, instead, an anti-foundationalism that described the simultaneity of plural teleologies and violent ruptures (against the idea of a linear historical evolution of progress towards a state of universal reason) and the inescapable heterogeneity of contemporary cultural life (Featherstone 1988; Harvey 1989; Kellner 1988).

To cultural anthropologists, for whom the diversity of language-games, plurality of worldviews, multiplicity of cultural histories, and incommensurability of forms of life are staples of the discipline, this is not a particularly novel observation. The hermeneutic tradition acknowledged this as its point of departure. What distinguishes a postmodern approach is the insistence upon the incommensurable **within** cultures, forms of life, or language games. As an example, Lyotard sees participation in language games as a struggle or conflict, as involving agonistic play (1984:10).

Lyotard rejects all totalizing accounts of [a] society, [a] tradition, or [a] culture, because these unifying models are both reductionist and exclusionary. They do violence by suppressing continuing and continually emergent differences in the name of a putative order. Postmodern theorists assert that it is no longer possible to consider culture

as a Grand Hotel, as a totalizable system that somehow orchestrates all cultural production and reception according to one master system; how we conceptualize... culture depends upon the discourses that construct it in conflicting, often contradictory ways, according to the interests and values of those discourses as they struggle to legitimize themselves as privileged forms of representation (Collins 1989:xiii).

One postmodern agenda (which both feminist and postmodern ethnographers endeavour to realize) is

to deconstruct modernism... in order to rewrite it, to open its closed systems... to the 'heterogeneity' of texts, to rewrite its universal techniques... — in short to challenge its master narratives with the 'discourses of others' (Foster 1983:x).

Steven Connor writes

to articulate questions of power and value in postmodernity is often to identify centralizing principles — of self, gender, race, nation, aesthetic form — in order to determine what those centres push to their silent or invisible peripheries. The project can be seen as one of bringing the consciousness of those peripheries back into the centre (1989:228).

Traditionally, interpretive anthropologists endeavoured to do just this. The project of cultural anthropology effects a cultural critique of Western claims to universality. Exposing the contingency of those claims through the revelation of other worldviews, anthropologists have long been engaged in the task of "articulating the margins" (Connor 1989:232). Now, those in the discipline must press further. We are compelled to create the space in which excluded "others" **within** "cultures" may express critically productive commentaries upon the singular cultural systems that define our discipline's own "masternarratives."

A postmodernist anthropology must be attuned to the politics of representation, not simply in the service of creating more literary ethnographies, but as a means of undermining "the languages, systems of metaphors, and regimes of images that seem designed to silence those whom they embody in representation" (Connor 1989:232; Spivak 1990) and affirms "the right of formerly un or misrepresented human groups to speak for and represent themselves in domains defined, politically and intellectually, as normally excluding them" (Said 1986:215). Children, the handicapped, the incarcerated, and those who occupy alternative gender positions need to be included here, as well as more traditional minorities defined by caste, class, race, ethnicity and sexual orientation, amongst the peoples anthropologists encounter. The ethical dilemmas, political quandries and theoretical questions raised by such emphasis on marginality are significant (see Connor 1989:231-244). They must at least be addressed, however, if the discipline is to get beyond its historical associations with Western colonialism and imperialism.

Postmodernism shares with hermeneutics a commitment to understanding culture and knowledge as socially constructed, but postmodernism is also committed to exploring the complex interrelationships between culture and power. It considers the genealogy of the cultural in terms of historically specific practices — postmodern aesthetic theory, for example, attempts "to restore the repressed political dimensions of aesthetic and cultural activity of all kinds" (Connor 1989:224). Cultural realities are understood as multiple and fractured, social life is seen in terms of the local and conflictual relations of its production.

Postmodernist approaches may also be distinguished from hermeneutic ones by a discomfort

with modernity's surface/depth metaphors that "interpreted" cultural life as a mere manifestation of some underlying deeper structure of reality such as desire, the unconscious, social structure, or the economy. (Marx, Freud, and Levi-Strauss look equally modern from this vantage). There are various critiques of the "hermeneutics of suspicion" ranging from the peculiarly celebratory despair of Jean Baudrillard to the humanism of Renato Rosaldo and Paul Stoller.⁵ What they have in common is a conviction that representations of cultural phenomena that privilege deep structures do a form of violence to lived experience and usually fail to grasp the meaning of cultural activity to those engaged in it (Marcus 1986:179; Rosaldo 1989:2; Stoller 1989:57). Drawn to activities (like ritual and ceremony) most likely to yield recurrences of structure, ethnographers may not consider the more meaningful, if extemporaneous practices of everyday life.

Corresponding developments in literary theory are informative for anthropologists, because they share a rejection of the modernist concept of literary works as self-sufficient wholes and evoke a similar challenge to the modernist insistence upon the integrity and autonomy of the literary artefact. Like postmodern ethnographic theory, postmodernist criticism must engage a writing lodged in experience rather than form. Thus literary critics must consider:

the open temporality of a text in the interests of breaking the interpretive will-to-power of criticism, which always construes a text from the standpoint of its ultimate or single timeless meaning. For a postmodern criticism, what was... conceived as an artefact to be read... an image to be looked at... an it, to be mastered, becomes 'oral speech' to be heard immediately in time. (Connor 1989:119-20).

Like the postmodern ethnographer, the postmodern literary critic ceases to focus upon texts or cultural phenomena as timeless statements of value and explores them as "the real, the occasional speech of temporally and historically situated human beings" (Connor 1989:120). The emphasis is upon contingency and particularity rather than the eternal and the abstract as

postmodernist poetry returns to a narrative of a less exalted, less egocentric kind, a narrative... hospitable to the loose, the contingent, the unformed and the incomplete in language and experience (Connor 1989:121).

Postmodern perspectives then, are characterized by their emphasis upon the cultural politics of quotidian practice. Cultural studies of postmodernism, for example, reject modernity's boundaries between culture and everyday life as well as the related distinction between high culture and popular culture (Featherstone 1988, 1991; Foster 1983; Grossberg 1988; Hutcheon 1989; Jameson 1991; Kellner 1988). Postmodernism shifts our attention to everyday cultural practices as the locus both of domination and transformation (Ross 1988), a direction in which cultural anthropology ventured with its "theory of practice" orientation in the 1980s (Bourdieu 1977; Coombe 1989; de Certeau 1984; Ortner 1984; Sahlin 1985; Stephens 1989; Thompson 1984).

Postmodernism, then, is a perspective upon cultural practice that provokes us to consider phenomena in a new manner. It also suggests that we consider new phenomena, given the changing character of the worlds people live in. The historical sociocultural complex known as "the postmodern condition" or "condition of postmodernity" refers to a multiplicity of processes. The breakdown of boundaries between cultures and the implosion of difference within cultures has been alluded to. These developments, however, must be related to a global restructuring of capitalism, and new media, information, and communications technologies (see Angus and Jhally 1989; Appadurai 1990; Harvey 1989; Hinkson 1990; Jameson 1991; Ross 1988).

One significant implication of the "postmodern condition" is that it renders utterly anachronistic traditional disciplinary divisions of labour between those concerned with culture (interpretivists) and those concerned with power and economics (political economists).⁶ I suggested earlier that the cultural must be understood politically and this is especially true in a late capitalist context where capitalist exchange relations are increasingly constitutive of knowledge, information, cultural exchange, identity and perhaps consciousness itself (Angus and Jhally 1989; Baudrillard 1975, 1981, 1983a, 1988b; Jameson 1991; Kellner 1988, 1989). If we become aware of politics and economics through representations and images disseminated through a mass media that proffers them as consumer choices, politics becomes a matter of signification. Political communities must increasingly be forged and to be forged they must first be imagined, given the heterogeneity of peoples and the mobility of populations to which political leaders must appeal. Benedict Anderson's definition

of nationalism as “imagined community” suggests that communities must be constructed through images of communion (1983:115) and that politics of any scale must be created through representation. Moreover, mass media communications enable people to participate in communities of others with whom they share neither geographical proximity nor a common history, but a shared access to signs, symbols, images, narratives and other signifying resources with which they construct and convey solidarity, social challenge, and aspirational ideals (Bacon-Smith 1992; Coombe 1991, 1992a); McRobbie 1989; Willis 1990). As cultural interpreters we cannot avoid considerations of the political economies of representation that pervade everyday life, and as political economists we cannot evade the increasingly cultural nature of political and economic value in the late twentieth century.

Social theorists of the postmodern — especially Fredric Jameson (1991) and Jean Baudrillard (1983a, 1983b, 1988a, 1988b; Kellner 1988, 1989) attempt to explicate the cultural logic of late capitalist or postindustrial societies oriented towards commodity consumption through mass media. These theories, however, require the ethnographic efforts of anthropologists to supplement, modify, and correct their visions, generalizations, and especially their excesses. In these descriptions of commodified worlds — saturated with signifiers but bereft of meaning — people lose creative agency and social interests, appearing as passive, withdrawn creatures restricted to playing at pastiche with the decorative surfaces of their past.

A growing number of cultural studies scholars accuse postmodern social theory of remarkable insensitivity to people’s actual experiences of the postmodern condition (Featherstone 1988, 1991; Grossberg 1988; Kellner 1988, 1989). Anthropologists are ideally skilled to embark on voyages that take us beyond the dominant “cultural logic of late capitalism” (Jameson 1991) and into the terrain in which historically situated human beings “live and negotiate the everyday life of consumer capitalism” (Ross 1988:xv). How do people use commodified texts, commercial signs, celebrity images, and mass culture in their quotidian practices? It is suggested that the media and media promoted commodities increasingly provide the resources with which those in subordinate social positions construct identity and community (Hebdige 1979, 1987; Hutcheon 1989; McRobbie 1989; Willis 1990). Elsewhere I have written

about the manner in which subaltern groups use mass media circulated celebrity images to construct alternative gender identities (Coombe 1992a). In a recent ethnography, Camille Bacon-Smith (1992) explores the identities and communities middle class American women forge through their “recodings” (Foster 1985) of Star Trek texts and iconography. Other such ethnographic studies might yield a host of new insights into subcultural practices.

To what extent, and to what degree, we might ask, may consumption practices employ strategies of empowerment, resistance, contestation, and critique (Ross 1988:xv), and what experiential, structural, and institutional restraints does the commodity or media form impose?⁷ How are corporate capital’s regimes of signification detoured or redeployed? How do developments in capital restructuring produce new spaces (Harvey 1989), and how do different groups of people recreate and occupy those spaces? (See for egs. Davis 1990; Deutsche 1990; Dorst 1989; Gottlieb 1992, n.d.; Rouse 1991, 1992; Ruddick 1990; Stoller 1989: 56-68). How are time, history, and cultural memory transformed by capital and media? (Borofsky 1987; Dorst 1989; Lipsitz 1987). These are queries that ethnographers in capitalist societies and emerging cash economies must address. Anthropologists interested in people’s active engagement with commodified cultural forms will find suggestive (if inadequate) theoretical resources afforded by the works of de Certeau (1984), John Fiske (1989a, 1989b), Hal Foster (1983, 1985), and Andrew Ross (1989) — all of whom see consumption as an active creation rather than a passive dependence upon dominant forms of representation.

If commodified cultural forms are now ubiquitous in contemporary Western societies, this phenomenon must be related to massive changes in the rest of the world. Western societies become “reproductive” or “postindustrial” through the movement of production and industry elsewhere (especially into free production and export processing zones). Inequalities in distribution of wealth are increased, abysmal working conditions become the norm, poverty is feminized in both urban and rural areas, the viability of agriculture declines, and traditional communities undergo massive transformations (Froebel 1980; Nash and Kelly 1983; Nelson 1989a, 1989b; Smith 1988a).

Social changes effected by multinational capital accumulation were traditionally treated by the discipline as the terrain of political economy; their cul-

tural dimensions were rarely addressed by interpretive anthropologists. Often, indeed, the introduction of Western commodities and technologies is viewed as indicia that the cultural anthropologist's domain of study is shrinking — as if culture disappears with the introduction of Coca Cola (Solway and Lee (1990) refer to this as “the Coke bottle in the Kalahari syndrome”). Fortunately, we are beginning to see resistance to the theorization of capital as a global steam roller, ironing out cultural difference as it makes the world uniform (Appadurai 1990; Polier and Roseberry 1989). After several decades mourning the demise of pristine and timeless cultures, anthropologists now recognize their own attitudes as a form of “imperialist nostalgia” — a pose of innocent yearning for a way of life that one was oneself complicit in transforming (Rosaldo 1989:69 -86).

It is impossible to dispute the transformative effects of industrialization, proletarianization, agricultural “development,” and incorporation into market economies. We are increasingly aware, however, that inclusion “within the world market or the introduction of capitalist social relations does not set a local population en route to an unalterable or predictable series of social or cultural changes” (Roseberry 1989:51-2). In any society, the local consequences of such developments will be influenced by the indigenous conditions with which they must engage — conditions which are cultural as well as social and economic. Anthropologists are ever more aware of the significance of local systems of meaning in determining world capital's impact in non Western societies. Indigenous cultural values shape the transformations external forces engender and the ironies and resistances they generate. Jean Comaroff (1985), for example, shows that advancing capitalist systems interact with indigenous cultural forms to produce dialectically reciprocal transformations. “Indigenous trajectories of desire and fear interact with global flows of people and things” (Appadurai 1990:3), in ways too subtle for development theories to address. Many anthropologists, for example, have shown how wage labour relationships take on new significations when they are engaged in terms of traditional cultural values (Crain 1991; Nash 1979; Ong 1987; Taussig 1980). “Lifeworlds” also colonize “systems,” contradicting the universalizing teleologies and strictures propounded by some anti-postmodernist social theorists (eg. Habermas 1984, 1988).

Insufficient ethnographic investigation has been conducted into people's cultural concepts, experi-

ences, and practices of commodity consumption in industrialising societies (But see Comaroff and Comaroff 1990; Friedman 1991; Gottlieb 1992; Philibert 1989; Shipton 1989).⁸ Similarly, we have limited ethnographic studies of people's interpretive receptions of Western media (Lyons 1990; Miller 1991) and technologies (Hammond 1988; Jules-Rosette 1990) — technologies that are “Western” only in their invention, for they are increasingly manufactured outside of Europe and North America. Moreover, ethnographers must consider the commodification of community, identity, and tradition, as these, too, become goods exchanged on transnational circuits (Dorst 1989; Ebron n.d.; Feld n.d.).

From a superficial perspective, the proliferation of Coca-Cola, Exxon, Barbie dolls, and Big Macs around the globe appears as a universalization and homogenization of culture. It is not inevitably the case, however, that these phenomena assume the same meanings in other cultures that they do in our own (Appadurai 1990; Friedman 1988, O'Barr 1989). It is surely a form of imperialist hubris (and a marketing fantasy) to believe that they do. The social dynamics of the cultural indigenization of metropolitan forces — “the internalization of the external” (Roseberry 1989:88-89 citing Cardoso and Falleto 1979), and, I would add, “the externalization of the internal,” must be explored. (This is a venture recently undertaken by the journal *Public Culture*).

To engage the postmodern condition we need to transcend concepts of commodities as transparent symbols of Western hegemony (Solway and Lee 1990) and understand them, like other cultural signifiers, as polyvalent — capable of acquiring new meanings in new contexts. It is ethnocentric to believe that when others become involved in cash economies, open to multinational advertising strategies, and engaged in consumer choices, that our own common sense categories thus suffice to make sense of their lives (Rosaldo 1989: 199). Cultural anthropologists too often entertain “an imaginary of Capital that consigns it to the demonology of the Other” (Ross 1988; xiv). Reifying it as a monolithic, cunning agent, we fetishize its cultural power, and devalue the complex significative work people do while promoting, transforming, and subverting its narratives and its trajectories. One acute danger posed by multinational capital to the discipline of cultural anthropology is our own fatal resignation in its wake.

The cultural conditions of postmodernism should provoke cultural anthropologists to examine the complex politics of cultural production and the meaningful dimensions of late twentieth century politics and economies. Cultural anthropology engages the postmodern by exploring the cultural politics of everyday life.

Notes

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- 1. The literature exploring the political problematic of representation in ethnographic writing is now quite extensive. See Clifford 1988; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Marcus and Fischer 1986; Sangren 1988; Sanjek 1990; Stoller 1989; and Tyler 1984, 1986 for discussions of this topic.
- 2. This tendency has its roots in the European Enlightenment where culture was constructed as a category to serve bourgeois needs for a "public sphere" according to Terry Eagleton (1984). The idea of culture as relatively stable, commonly held beliefs was one that owed its origins to the cohesiveness and homogeneity of the educated class in 18th century European Enlightened societies. The idea of a cohesive public sphere is increasingly challenged in 19th century European societies as literacy spreads across gender and class lines (See Collins 1989:3-5) and in the 20th century across national and racial boundaries, creating a proliferation of reading and writing publics that contest and interrogate each other's assumptions about cultural legitimacy and value. As categories of texts and readers multiply and diversify "culture" becomes a fundamentally conflicted terrain (Collins 1989:5). For an historical discussion of the term "culture" see Williams, *Keywords* (1983:87-93).
- 3. Relevant zones of difference will themselves be culturally specific and constantly emerging.
- 4. Literary theorist Brian McHale (1987) suggests that the modernist novel (like the modernist ethnography) was concerned with epistemological questions of knowledge and interpretation — what can truthfully be known, understood, and communicated about the world. In the postmodern epoch there is a shift to ontological concerns about being and existence. Instead of asking questions about how a world may be known, postmodernist fiction asks the questions "What is a world?; What kinds of worlds are there,

how are they constituted, and how do they differ?; What happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?" (10). These ontological questions are also those that postmodern ethnographies engage.

- 5. Poststructuralism has also played a major role in undermining the hermeneutics of suspicion (see for example, Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983) but its motivations are more clearly anti-humanist.
- 6. This is recognized by many anthropologists who would nonetheless reject the notion of a "postmodern" anthropology because of the "idealist" excesses of those they see preoccupied with questions of textuality. For example, William Roseberry (1989) argues for a rejection of the opposition between political economy and symbolic anthropology (32) and suggests an historical approach that:

tries to place itself between the extreme versions of explanatory scientism and interpretive self-absorption. That is, it rejects the goal of an explanatory science that postulates a set of transhistorical laws of history or evolution. Yet it is also resolutely materialist: it sees ideas as social products and understands social life as itself objective and material. Its approach to public symbols and cultural meanings would therefore place those symbols and meanings in social fields characterized by differential access to political and economic power (36-7).

Very little, if any, of this statement would be objectionable to theorists of the postmodern despite Roseberry's evident distaste for the term. See also Ferguson (1988).

- 7. I have been exploring these issues with regard to the texts, symbols and images commodified by intellectual property laws (See Coombe 1991; 1992; 1992b); n.d.(1)).
- 8. Roseberry (1989) also suggests that we stop seeing the introduction of metropolitan goods and commodities as a form of loss or debasement and recognize that they may be felt or experienced as forms of social and economic advancement, and increased comfort and leisure (114). He also suggests we differentiate between new consumer goods (in the Latin American context) in terms of those that are "necessities" and those that express U.S. power and influence (115). Although I welcome the direction of these suggestions, I believe that understanding the meaning and value of mass market commodities will require an interpretive perspective far more sensitive to local, indigenous subtleties in the creation of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984) in the construction of social identities in fields of ever emergent differentiation. For a provocative discussion see Friedman (1991).

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