

## Culture



## Concluding Comments

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# Concluding Comments

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*These comments were prepared separately by the four graduate student participants in the Colloquium, and edited into a single text by Ellen Badone.*

This is a stimulating and thought-provoking set of papers on key theoretical and methodological issues facing contemporary anthropology. The papers cover a wide variety of topics, ranging from embodiment and the meeting of local and global worlds within postcolonial society, to questions of fieldwork observation and textuality. As the authors have demonstrated, ethnographic description and representation are central themes of concern to all areas of our discipline.

These papers demonstrate clearly that as anthropologists, we need to be careful listeners to the voices of those we purport to study, and we must be sensitive to the rich diversity of accounts provided by individuals of different social and political positions, genders, and cultural backgrounds. We also need to listen to the voices of our colleagues in fellow disciplines of history, philosophy and literature, acknowledging the complementarity of different perspectives and approaches to the representation of human society.

As a starting point for organizing our thoughts on the Canadian Anthropological Society colloquium, we have focussed on a theme that runs through all the papers: language and power; the power that anthropologists and the people they study have to name their own *as well as other's* experiences of culture, capitalism, nation, birth and death. Gilles Bibeau and Jean Comaroff concentrate on the power of language to create identities; Bibeau focuses on national and classical literatures by writers of a number of post-independence African nations, while Comaroff emphasizes more popular media representations, such as newspaper and magazine articles, which could be called "the gossip of a nation." At the same time, François

Laplantine's call for the development of an anthropology of the spectacle, an ocular rather than a visual anthropology, asks us to make our informants, participants, and ourselves visible, through a critical re-reading of ethnography and also a writing of new identities made possible in the process.

Both Bibeau and Comaroff problematize people's representations of their own pasts. Bibeau suggests that the representation of history through national writing, sometimes based on a "purer" oral history, or "mother tongue," may be successful in representing new national identities in postcolonial nations in particular. Comaroff describes how, in the current transition to capitalism in Africa, and with the dislocating effects of capitalism in America, many depict the present *as if* there was a less frightening, less destabilizing past and, by doing so, argue that the present is somehow disconnected from or discontinuous with that past. Each author describes a process of representing the past through a form of nostalgic retelling/recounting/representing. For Bibeau, the "other" is colonialism and it is against this state-of-being that national writers must write; for Comaroff, the "other" is capitalism and it is both fear and desire that shape people's responses to it.

For Laplantine, the "other" is the anthropologist. Laplantine's focus is on what the anthropologist does *prior* to writing, prior to using the power of his/her language. While Laplantine calls for a renewal of interest in the ethnographic gaze as an ocular experience rather than as a written or graphic experience, he still returns us to the importance of the written word and its power to present and represent. Paraphrasing a Bakhtinian dialogic, Laplantine suggests that "society

is a text...the text is social....and the real is textual." We return then, to the power of "words that are not interchangeable with the experience that one confronts" for they are all we have to express that encounter.<sup>1</sup>

Bibeau follows Gayatri Spivak, echoing the question: will the postcolonial be heard especially if she speaks in an anthropology that challenges the colonial? We must also speak of the problem of listening, for as Spivak implies, the question is not only who will speak, but who will listen. In reiterating this query, Bibeau interpreted it as a problem of translation: if we do not speak the language of the subaltern, or if they do not (choose to) write in a language we can understand, how can we listen? We are concerned to give voice to others, but the problems we face are more profound than is usually admitted. It is not simply a case of translating well, for it is very difficult to put aside our projections and investments and really hear what any "other" is saying in our everyday relations here at home, let alone in a different cultural context. Spivak's question was raised again by Francine Saillant in her response to Laplantine: who gets included and who gets excluded from the new transnational, globalized world? In posing this question, she raises the issue of who gets any representation at all. Perhaps anthropology must revisit the *invisible* women living in Montreal's underground garages in minus 30 degree weather in order to make the discipline relevant and challenging.

The issue of power is addressed again in the paper by Margaret Lock, which discusses the complex motives, both economic and ideological, for redefining death. Lock's paper draws particular attention to the powerful nature of decisions made by biomedical authorities regarding mental functioning. Too often individuals in our society take medical decisions for granted, failing to recognize the biomedical model as situated within particular historical, political, economic and social contexts. Values privileging technological sophistication, and the social position accorded to doctors have fostered the perception of the unquestionable authority of the North American medical system. Likewise, in the biomedical discourse, organ donors are depicted as heroes and the epitome of the generous gift-giver. In connection with the themes of power and domination in the postcolonial era explored in the other papers, Lock identifies the brain-dead 'cyborg' as territory of contested meaning, particularly as individuals and medical systems in many societies grapple with the implications of the authority of western biomedicine for the practices and belief systems which inform their patterns of daily living. The postmodern

cyborg body creates a polysemic reality, which is highly pertinent to discussions of the new, if obscure, world order.

It seems that these papers are playing with orientations, juxtaposing field sites of home and away, forcing confrontations between North American social issues and those issues as they are experienced elsewhere (Africa, Japan), revealing numerous political and social overlaps. In each of these discussions, the skewing of meanings and the blurring of boundaries between "the West and the rest" are essential themes in reflecting on the postcolonial, late-capitalist, transnational contexts in which we live, often without feeling like active contestants in such systems. The multiplicity of voices and of positionings, and of questionings of our social stances as anthropologists, is critical in moving away from exoticizing, constructing and representing the Other. Rather, as illustrated by all of these rich and stimulating papers, we must strive to combine, juxtapose and engage myriad and sometimes contradictory voices, spaces and places. Ceci fait émerger une image plus diversifiée et dynamique de l'ethnographie dans une époque dit "postcoloniale." Comme le dit François Laplantine, "l'être se dit de multiple façons."

### Notes

1. These translations retain the sense of the original but are not exact.

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