

Culture



The Lens of Enchantment

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Volume 13, numéro 1, 1993

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1081390ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081390ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA),
formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne
d'Ethnologie

ISSN

0229-009X (imprimé)

2563-710X (numérique)

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Citer ce document

Keesing, R. (1993). The Lens of Enchantment. *Culture*, 13(1), 57–59.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1081390ar>

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Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie, 1993

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The Lens of Enchantment

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It is an honor to be able to comment on the work of a colleague — and fellow boundary transgressor — whose work I have long admired, and to reflect on the provocative and stimulating ideas he has set out for us here.

I will come back to some thoughts about his thoughts about boundaries. I want to begin by underlining the importance of the political message that runs through his lecture. The current preoccupation with boundaries — with the transnational flow of people, ideas, and things, the globalization of culture — can too easily lose sight of, or worse, disguise, the political economy that underlies and generates these crossings of traditional boundaries. Anthropology's long-dominant conceptualizations of local ways of life as bounded, static, timeless and self-contained left a host of questions unasked: questions about the political economy of the global economic system, and the colonial regimes that not only impacted on but often largely created these separate tribes or peoples we were studying; and questions as well about the internal cleavages, of gender and status, **within** such communities

Now we can no longer cling to our images of a static, timeless tribal world divided into separate cultural compartments, we have turned to a new set

of images — of flow, boundary crossings, flux, contextual shifting, negotiation, pastiche, creolization. Yet as Professor Fabian aptly warns us, seeing the world through a postmodern lens in which images move and become blurred, fuzzy and superimposed can lead us yet again to ignore the global political economy of power and interest that is generating the flux and movement. This lens has a power of enchantment: it allows us to see some things vividly, while hiding a host of others; or better put, allows us **not** to see a host of others.

A second theme in regard to boundaries running through Professor Fabian's paper concerns the fences that have separated traditional academic disciplines from one another, and the recent wave of boundary transgressions in which anthropologists have participated. As an old fence-jumper and inveterate dilettante, I share his view that these transgressions are by and large a good thing — both when they bring non-anthropologists, colleagues in political science and English literature, into what we have imagined was "our" territory (as in the burgeoning of "cultural studies"), and when they lead us onto the turf of the historians or the literary critics.

Professor Fabian's brilliant writings on history, language, and politics in a context of colonial dom-

ination, as well as anthropology, serve to show how mutually enriching the different sides and disciplinary directions of our work can be. What he has done and learned in one disciplinary domain has given vital insights into, and data for, the work done in another. And so I have found it in my own work. Next month, I will give a plenary address in Amsterdam to the Society for Pidgin and Creole Linguistics. Many of the tape recorded texts that now provide a fantastic record of sixty years of Solomon Islands Pidgin English were recorded twenty years ago and more, when I was doing research on colonial history.

My only concern about all this crossing of disciplinary boundaries is that the fences cultural anthropologists are jumping nowadays lead us into the even squishier turf of the humanities. Few of us are jumping fences into more solid terrain — into the cognitive sciences, linguistics, the neurosciences, evolutionary biology. “Why these fences?”, you may well ask (particularly since it is fashionable to question the solidity of the scientists’ turf).

Many of anthropology’s big questions, I think, still have to do with the kind of creatures we *Homo sapiens* are — questions crucial to the interpretation of the cultures humans create. For even as anthropology examines contemporary cultural flow and the dissolution and interpermeation of boundaries, and increasingly questions whether cultural traditions were ever as sharply bounded as we made them seem, the gulfs that separate the Balinese and the Trobrianders and the Hopi, and separate all of them from us, continue to be celebrated in the symbolist tradition and its postmodern mutations. Yet the bulk of evidence coming from the cognitive sciences, linguistics, and modern biology points, in my view, to anthropology’s having radically overstated the extent of these differences, radically exaggerated the gulfs between culturally constructed worlds of thought and experience. Anthropologists who, when they venture to cross boundaries, read Bakhtin rather than Chomsky to learn about language, or Foucault rather than Neisser and Rumelhart to learn about memory, are likely to remain oblivious to cumulating evidence that the radically diverse cultures whose uniqueness we celebrate would neither be learnable nor thinkable by members of our species.

Indeed, the boundary crossings and the wondrous worldwide cultural flow, flux and creolization that are daily realities for the people we study should,

if we attended to them, deeply subvert our arguments for radical gulfs between culturally constructed worlds of experience. My Kwaio pagan friends in the Solomon Islands, sacrificing to their ancestors today in their mountain shrines may, a short plane ride later, be stealing safes or watching videos tomorrow. Too often, we filter out from our accounts the postmodern bricolage that goes on before our eyes in the field, where the old and the new, the endogenous and exogenous, are pasted together in wondrous collages that shift from moment to moment like kaleidoscopic images, and even what is cast as “traditional” is fashioned from borrowed bits and redecorated pieces. Indeed, it could be argued that the best places to study the symbolic processes of meaning construction, and hence “culture,” are in Brazzaville or Honiara — or Toronto or Montréal — and not in hinterlands villages. (All this may seem more obvious to those of you who work with indigenous peoples in North America than it does to those of us who work in New Guinea and nearby islands, where the romance of the culturally pristine is a more sustainable anthropological fantasy: but even in native communities here, there is more romance in studying hunting or traditional healing than snowmobile repair.)

That takes me back to boundaries in the sense I find most central in Professor Fabian’s lecture. In his pathbreaking 1983 book *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object*, he exposed as a foundational contradiction of our discipline what he calls the “denial of coevalness.” Once the anthropologist leaves the temporal co-engagement fieldwork entails, the Other is situated in a timeless realm of culture, essentialized and eternalized. As he has observed here, we have distanced the Other partly so that we can conceptualize fieldwork as a boundary-crossing, a rite of passage in which we separate ourselves from the world of the familiar. Returning, initiated, from this liminality, we situate those with whom we shared it in the timeless realm of “culture.”

What is to become of a discipline that has taken as its focus cultural Otherness in its most radical forms, and thus has been from its inception a part of the imperial project? What is to happen now our right and our capacity to represent the Other is challenged both by those who have been our subjects, cast as objects, and from within our own camp? Is the boundary to be erased? Closed? Crossed in both directions? Are we to study only on our own side — the homeless or the “ethnic” or the refugees

or the drug addicts? And if we do, are we not simply redrawing the boundaries, with an Other closer to home, but still marginal and powerless? Like Professor Fabian, I am troubled with these questions, though I have no magical answers to them. I share his skepticism that changing our tropes from boundary-maintenance to boundary-crossing will resolve old contradictions concerning the politics of representation.

Finally, I want to come back to an image evoked early in Professor Fabian's talk, of border guards as gatekeepers, and of "the border as a place and time of dominance/submission". The genocidal insanity in Bosnia, as in Nazi Germany, reminds us that boundaries encircle, entrap, and imprison; that crossing frontiers can be a matter of control and state power. We can look closer to home as well. The border between Mexico and the U.S. is easily perme-

able if you are a Mexican peasant needed as a cheap farm worker by agribusiness in California, and brutally closed if you are a Salvadorean or Guatemalan refugee from U.S. supported political terror. Indeed, we do not have to leave Canada to be reminded that the gatekeepers of the state have the power to define patriarchal terror as domestic conflict from which one cannot be a political refugee.

This is, indeed, a time to study boundaries and boundary-crossing. But ultimately, as Professor Fabian has warned, terror and power, conflicts of class and gender, a political economy of interest, are constitutive of the borders and control the movements across them. If we focus too narrowly, uncritically, and apolitically, we can render it all in pretty cultural pictures, the captivating collages and multiple, shifting images of our postmodern era.

On Crossing Borders And Boundaries: A Parallax View Of The Postmodern Experience

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Professor Fabian's observations about the potential problems entailed in embracing a new—if it is new—root metaphor will serve as my point of departure. Perhaps I can also start to address the issue of practicality and the image of one humanity by wandering around for a bit in a problematizing landscape. To begin, let us go back in time...

On June 13, 1940, as the German army marched into Paris, Simone Weil confided a startling and seemingly perverse observation to her journal. "This is," she wrote, "a great day for the people of Indochina." (Reiff, 1990:15) I mention this hurried jotting in the private journal of a European Jewish intellectual more than half a century ago to make a simple point: it matters rather a lot who is crossing just what border. Too abstract or universal a notion of borders will, I fear, risk a unidimensional understanding by privileging the notion of borders over the people who cross them. Weil established a parallax perspective (one where objects appear to change position when observed from different points) in her

interpretation of the Nazi occupation of her homeland by drawing attention to the coming French retreat (and implicitly, the prior French occupation) of Indochina. This perspective is similar to the postmodern emphasis on irony and especially cynical or dead power.

As Fabian notes, one of the human experiences at borders is "submission". In this connection it is worth noting that the passport itself was instituted by England at the outset of the first World War. The intent was to keep people from leaving, because to re-enter Britain would require a valid passport. Indeed, most passports actually issued were one-way (out). Regulation 14c of D.O.R.A., passed Nov. 30, 1915 reads, "A person coming from or intending to proceed to any place out of the United Kingdom as a passenger shall not, without the special permission of a Secretary of State, land or embark at any port in the United Kingdom unless he has in his possession a valid passport..." Although a war-time measure, like early pub closings, it was never repealed. The