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Source: *Signs*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Autumn, 1989), pp. 7-33

Published by: The University of Chicago Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3174704>

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# THE POSTMODERNIST TURN IN ANTHROPOLOGY: CAUTIONS FROM A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

FRANCES E. MASCIA-LEES, PATRICIA SHARPE, AND COLLEEN BALLERINO COHEN

At this profoundly self-reflexive moment in anthropology—a moment of questioning traditional modes of representation in the discipline—practitioners seeking to write a genuinely new ethnography would do better to use feminist theory as a model than to draw on postmodern trends in epistemology and literary criticism with which they have thus far claimed allegiance.<sup>1</sup> Unlike postmod-

We wish to thank Mary Margaret Kellogg for her generous support of the Women's Studies Program at Simon's Rock of Bard College and its Faculty Development Fund. Support from that fund and from Vassar College made it possible for us to present an earlier version of this paper at the 86th annual meetings of the American Anthropological Association in Chicago, Illinois. We also wish to thank Francis C. Lees for keeping us warm and well fed while we worked, Nancy Hartsock for her inspiration and helpful suggestions, and Alissa Rupp and William Maurer for their assistance.

<sup>1</sup> The term "new ethnography" is commonly used to refer to cultural accounts that are reflexive in a sense seldom seen in traditional ethnographic writing. This reflexivity can take the form of identification of the fieldworker as an actor in the ethnographic situation, as in Paul Rabinow's *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977); Barbara Myerhoff's *Number Our Days* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978); Paul Friedrich's *The Princes of Naranja: An Essay in Anthrohistorical Method* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986); Marianne Alverson's *Under African Sun* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987); J. Favret-Saada's *Deadly Words: Witchcraft in the Bocage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); and Manda Cesara's *Reflections of a Woman Anthropologist: No Hiding Places* (New York: Academic

ernism, feminist theory is an intellectual system that knows its politics, a politics directed toward securing recognition that the feminine is as crucial an element of the human as the masculine, and thus a politics skeptical and critical of traditional “universal truths” concerning human behavior. Similarly, anthropology is grounded in a politics: it aims to secure a recognition that the non-Western is as crucial an element of the human as the Western and thus is skeptical and critical of Western claims to knowledge and understanding.

Anthropologists influenced by postmodernism have recognized the need to claim a politics in order to appeal to an anthropological audience. This is evident even in the titles of the two most influential explications of this reflexive moment: *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences* and *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the pop-

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Press, 1982). It can present a commentary on cultural difference through the highlighting of intersubjective interactions, as in Marjorie Shostak's *Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981); Kevin Dwyer's *Moroccan Dialogues* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982); and Vincent Crapanzano's *Tuhami: Portrait of a Moroccan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). It can experiment with traditional ethnographic rhetorical forms, as in Edward Schieffelin's *The Sorrow of the Lonely and the Burning of the Dancers* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976); and Michelle Rosaldo's *Knowledge and Passion: Ilongot Notions of Self and Social Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980); or it can offer a close scrutiny of global systems of domination through the examination of symbolic manifestations in the lives of individuals, as in Michael Taussig's *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980); June Nash's *We Eat the Mines and the Mines Eat Us: Dependency and Exploitation in Bolivian Tin Mines* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979); and Gananath Obeyesekere's *Medusa's Hair: An Essay on Personal Symbols and Religious Experience* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1981). In addition, there is a recent movement to read traditional ethnographic texts, such as Bronislaw Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (New York: Dutton, 1961); and E. E. Evans-Pritchard's *The Nuer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940), for their narrative structure or rhetorical style, as well as to claim early texts once presented as “mere fiction,” such as Elenore Bowen's (pseudonym for Laura Bohannon) *Return to Laughter: An Anthropological Novel* (New York: Harper & Row, 1954); and Gregory Bateson's *Naven: A Survey of the Problems Suggested by a Composite Picture of a Culture of a New Guinea Tribe Drawn from Three Points of View* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1936), as precursors to the “new ethnography.” This list is not exhaustive or particularly selective; many of these ethnographies employ several reflexive strategies. Among people talking about the new ethnography there is only limited consensus on which works are exemplars of the trend.

<sup>2</sup> George E. Marcus and Michael M. J. Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986); James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986).

ularity of these books may be due as much to their appeal to anthropologists' traditional moral imperative—that we must question and expand Western definitions of the human—as to the current concern with modes of expression. Postmodern in their attention to texture and form as well as in their emphasis on language, text, and the nature of representation, these two works seek to connect this focus with the politics inherent in the anthropological enterprise. George Marcus and Michael Fischer's *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*, for example, starts off with a restatement of anthropology's traditional goals: to salvage "distinct cultural forms of life from the processes of global Westernization" and to serve "as a form of cultural critique of ourselves."<sup>3</sup> In keeping with postmodernism's emphasis on style, the authors claim that it is through new types of experimental ethnographic writing that anthropology can best expose the global systems of power relations that are embedded in traditional representations of other societies.

Underlying the new ethnography are questions concerning anthropology's role in the maintenance of Western hegemony: how have anthropological writings constructed or perpetuated myths about the non-Western "other"? How have these constructed images served the interest of the West? Even when critiquing colonialism and questioning Western representations of other societies, anthropology cannot avoid proposing alternative constructions. This has led to the recognition that ethnography is "always caught up with the invention, not the representation, of cultures."<sup>4</sup> And, as James Clifford suggests, the resultant undermining of the truth claims of Western representations of the "other" has been reinforced by important theorizing about the limits of representation itself in diverse fields.<sup>5</sup>

Postmodernist anthropologists, with their focus on classic ethnographies as texts, wish to call attention to the constructed nature of cultural accounts. They also wish to explore new forms of writing that will reflect the newly problematized relationships among writer, reader, and subject matter in anthropology in an age when the native informant may read and contest the ethnographer's characterizations—indeed, may well have heard of Jacques Derrida and have a copy of the latest Banana Republic catalog.<sup>6</sup> Postmod-

<sup>3</sup> Marcus and Fischer, esp. 1.

<sup>4</sup> James Clifford, "Introduction," in Clifford and Marcus, eds., 1–26, esp. 2. See Roy Wagner, *The Invention of Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975) for an elaboration of this idea.

<sup>5</sup> Clifford, "Introduction," 10.

<sup>6</sup> Marilyn Strathern, "Out of Context: The Persuasive Fictions of Anthropology," *Current Anthropology* 28, no. 3 (June 1987): 251–70, esp. 269; James Clifford, "On

ernist anthropologists claim that the aim of experimentation with such forms as intertextuality, dialogue, and self-referentiality is to demystify the anthropologist's unitary authority and thus to include, and structure the relationships among, the "many voices clamoring for expression"<sup>7</sup> in the ethnographic situation. However, these new ways of structuring are more subtle and enigmatic than traditional modes of anthropological writing: they may serve to make the new ethnographies more obscure and, thus, difficult for anyone but highly trained specialists to dispute.

The essays in James Clifford and George Marcus's *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* are concerned with the explication of the relation between the ethnographic field situation and the style of the ethnographic text. In his introduction to the book, for example, Clifford explains the effects of the new ethnographers' use of dialogue: "It locates cultural interpretations in many sorts of reciprocal contexts, and it obliges writers to find diverse ways of rendering negotiated realities as multisubjective, power-laden, and incongruent. In this view, 'culture' is always relational, an inscription of communicative processes that exist, historically, *between* subjects in relation to power."<sup>8</sup>

Thus, Clifford argues that new ethnographers, those anthropologists who do not just theorize about textual production but who write cultural accounts, employ experimental writing techniques in an attempt to expose the power relations embedded in any ethnographic work and to produce a text that is less encumbered with Western assumptions and categories than traditional ethnographies have been. Michelle Rosaldo, for example, has attempted to make the initial cultural unintelligibility of the voice of an Ilongot headhunter persuasive not so much through argumentation or explication as through repetition.<sup>9</sup> In *Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman*, Marjorie Shostak juxtaposes the voice of the "other" with the voice of the ethnographer to offer the reader the possibility of confronting the difference between two distinct modes of understanding.<sup>10</sup> In *Moroccan Dialogues*, Kevin Dwyer experiments with a dialogic mode of representation to emphasize that the ethnographic text is a collaborative endeavor between himself and

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Ethnographic Allegory," in Clifford and Marcus, eds., 98–121, esp. 117; and Paul Stoller, "A Dialogue on Anthropology between a Songhay and an Inquirer" (paper presented at the eighty-seventh annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Phoenix, Ariz., November 16–20, 1988).

<sup>7</sup> Clifford, "Introduction," 15.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. (emphasis Clifford's).

<sup>9</sup> Rosaldo (n. 1 above).

<sup>10</sup> Shostak (n. 1 above).

a Moroccan farmer.<sup>11</sup> Other experimental works have concentrated on exposing how the observation, as well as the interpretation, of another culture are affected by a researcher's cultural identity and mode of expression. In *The Princes of Naranja: An Essay in Anthrohistorical Method*, for example, Paul Friedrich gives an extensive discussion of his own personal history, showing how his childhood farm experiences predisposed him to a study of agrarian life and how an almost unbelievable series of physical mishaps led him to reorganize his entire book. He also shows how this reordering and his choice of stylistic devices such as texturing and "historical holography" help convey a sense of Naranjan life as complex.<sup>12</sup>

However, what appear to be new and exciting insights to these new postmodernist anthropologists—that culture is composed of seriously contested codes of meaning, that language and politics are inseparable, and that constructing the "other" entails relations of domination<sup>13</sup>—are insights that have received repeated and rich exploration in feminist theory for the past forty years. Discussion of the female as "other" was the starting point of contemporary feminist theory. As early as 1949, Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* argued that it was by constructing the woman as "other" that men in Western culture have constituted themselves as subjects.<sup>14</sup> An early goal of this second wave of feminism was to recover women's experience and thereby to find ways that we as women could constitute ourselves—claim ourselves—as subjects. This early feminist theory does have similarities with traditional anthropology. Both were concerned with the relationship of the dominant and the "other," and with the need to expand and question definitions of the human. However, even in this early stage, a crucial difference existed between anthropological and feminist inquiries. While anthropology questioned the status of the participant-observer, it spoke from the position of the dominant and thus for the "other." Feminists speak from the position of the "other."

This is not to oversimplify. It was not possible for feminists to speak directly *as* "other." Women in consciousness-raising groups were not simply giving voice to already formulated but not yet articulated women's perspectives; they were creatively constructing them. In telling stories about their experiences, they were

<sup>11</sup> Dwyer (n. 1 above).

<sup>12</sup> Friedrich (n. 1 above).

<sup>13</sup> Clifford, "Introduction," 2.

<sup>14</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1949 in French; reprint, New York: Alfred Knopf, 1953).

giving them new meanings, meanings other than those granted by patriarchy, which sees women only as seductresses or wives, as good or bad mothers. Similarly, feminist scholars sought to construct new theoretical interpretations of women. Yet, even when attempting to speak for women, and as women, feminist scholars wrote within a patriarchal discourse that does not accord subject status to the feminine. In this way feminists exposed the contradictions in a supposedly neutral and objective discourse that always proceeds from a gendered being and thereby questioned the adequacy of academic discourse. Thus, feminist theory, even in the 1970s, was concerned not simply with understanding women's experience of otherness but also with the inscription of women as "other" in language and discourse. This was particularly evident in feminist literary criticism, which moved from the cataloging of stereotypes<sup>15</sup> to the study of female authorship as resistance and reinscription.<sup>16</sup> French feminists, notably Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, playfully exploited language's metaphoric and polysemic capacities to give voice to feminist reinterpretations of dominant myths about women.<sup>17</sup>

A fundamental goal of the new ethnography is similar: to apprehend and inscribe "others" in such a way as not to deny or diffuse their claims to subjecthood. As Marcus and Fischer put it, the new ethnography seeks to allow "the adequate representation of other voices or points of view across cultural boundaries."<sup>18</sup> Informed by the notion of culture as a collective and historically contingent construct, the new ethnography claims to be acutely sensitive to cultural differences and, within cultures, to the multiplicity of individual experience.

However, despite these similarities, when anthropologists look for a theory on which to ground the new ethnography, they turn to postmodernism, dismissing feminist theory as having little to teach

<sup>15</sup> See esp. Mary Ellmann, *Thinking about Women* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1968); and Annis Pratt, *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982).

<sup>16</sup> See esp. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1980); Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977); and Ellen Moers, *Literary Women* (New York: Doubleday, 1976).

<sup>17</sup> Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, in *The Signs Reader: Women, Gender and Scholarship*, ed. Elizabeth Abel and Emily K. Abel (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 279–97; and Luce Irigaray, "This Sex Which Is Not One," in *New French Feminisms*, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (New York: Schocken, 1981), 99–106.

<sup>18</sup> Marcus and Fischer (n. 2 above), 2.

that anthropology does not already know. For example, Marcus and Fischer claim, "The debate over gender differences stimulated by feminism . . . often [falls] into the same rhetorical strategies that once were used for playing off the dissatisfactions of civilized society against the virtues of the primitive."<sup>19</sup> By focusing exclusively on those feminists who valorize "essential" female characteristics like motherhood and peaceableness, Marcus and Fischer construe feminism as little more than the expression of women's dissatisfactions with a sinister patriarchy. Thus, their ignorance of the full spectrum of feminist theory may partly explain their dismissal of it.

Similarly, Clifford justifies the exclusion of feminist anthropologists from *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* with a questionable characterization of the feminist enterprise in anthropology: "Feminist ethnography has focused either on setting the record straight about women or revising anthropological categories. . . . It has not produced either unconventional forms of writing or a developed reflection on ethnographic textuality as such."<sup>20</sup> Clifford nonetheless uses Margorie Shostak's *Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman* as a primary example in his essay "On Ethnographic Allegory" in the same volume. In this essay, he calls Shostak's work at once "feminist" and "original in its polyvocality, . . . manifestly the product of a collaboration with the other," reflexive of "a troubled, inventive moment in the history of cross-cultural representation."<sup>21</sup> He therefore reveals not only that he clearly knows of at least one feminist ethnography that has employed "unconventional forms of writing," but also that he prefers to write about feminists rather than inviting them to write for themselves.

This contradiction makes sense in the context of Clifford's essay on ethnographic allegory. In it he seeks to demonstrate that the new ethnography is like traditional anthropological writings about the "other" in that both use allegory. He argues that all ethnography is inevitably allegorical since it at once presents us with a representation of a different reality and continuously refers to another pattern of ideas to make that difference comprehensible. It is odd that Clifford uses a feminist ethnography as his only example of how new ethnography is allegorical since, in view of his statement about feminist ethnography's lack of experimentation in his introduction, he himself should suspect that Shostak's work is not representative of the new ethnography. Such a contradiction seems

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>20</sup> Clifford, "Introduction," 20–21.

<sup>21</sup> Clifford, "On Ethnographic Allegory" (n. 6 above), 104–9.

to betray Clifford's tendency to equate women with forces of cultural conservatism. In dismissing the novelty of feminist work in anthropology, Clifford seeks to validate *Writing Culture* as truly innovative: "The essays in this volume occupy a new space opened up by the disintegration of 'Man' as *telos* for a whole discipline."<sup>22</sup> Like European explorers discovering the New World, Clifford and his colleagues perceive a new and uninhabited space where, in fact, feminists have long been at work.

How can we understand this dismissal of feminism in favor of postmodernism, the dismissal of political engagement in favor of a view that "beholds the world blankly, with a knowingness that dissolves feeling and commitment into irony"?<sup>23</sup> Anthropologists should be uncomfortable with an aesthetic view of the world as a global shopping center and suspicious of an ideology that sustains the global economic system.<sup>24</sup> Of course, there are many postmodernisms, just as there are many feminisms, and within both movements definitions are contested.<sup>25</sup> While there is also considerable overlap, postmodernism is unlike feminism in its relationship to the ferment of the 1960s.<sup>26</sup> While contemporary feminism is an ongoing political movement with roots in the 1960s, "post-modernism is above all post-1960s; its keynote is cultural helplessness. It is post-Viet Nam, post-New Left, post-hippie, post-Watergate. History was ruptured, passions have been expended, belief has become difficult. . . . The 1960s exploded our belief in progress. . . . Old verities crumbled, but new ones have not settled in. Self-regarding irony and blankness are a way of staving off anxieties, rages, terrors, and hungers that have been kicked up but cannot find resolution."<sup>27</sup> The sense of helplessness that postmodernism expresses is broader, however, than the disillusionment of the 1960s' leftists; it is an experience of tremendous loss of mastery in traditionally dominant groups. In the postmodern period, theorists "stave off" their anxi-

<sup>22</sup> Clifford, "Introduction," 4.

<sup>23</sup> Todd Gitlin, "Hip-Deep in Post-Modernism," *New York Times Book Review* (November 6, 1988), 1, 35–36, esp. 35.

<sup>24</sup> See Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. H. Foster (Port Townsend, Wash.: Bay Press, 1983), 111–25.

<sup>25</sup> This point recently has been made by Daryl McGowan Tress, "Comment on Flax's 'Postmodernism and Gender Relations in Feminist Theory,'" *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 14, no. 1 (Autumn 1988): 196–200.

<sup>26</sup> See Jane Flax, "Postmodernism and Gender Relations in Feminist Theory," *Signs* 12, no. 4 (Summer 1987): 621–43; Craig Owens, "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism," in Foster, ed., 57–82. Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson, "Social Criticism without Philosophy: An Encounter between Feminism and Postmodernism," *Theory, Culture, and Society* 5 (June 1988): 373–94, was very helpful to us on this point.

<sup>27</sup> Gitlin, 36.

ety by questioning the basis of the truths that they are losing the privilege to define.

Political scientist Nancy Hartsock has made a similar observation; she finds it curious that the postmodern claim that verbal constructs do not correspond in a direct way to reality has arisen precisely when women and non-Western peoples have begun to speak for themselves and, indeed, to speak about global systems of power differentials.<sup>28</sup> In fact, Hartsock suggests that the postmodern view that truth and knowledge are contingent and multiple may be seen to act as a truth claim itself, a claim that undermines the ontological status of the subject at the very time when women and non-Western peoples have begun to claim themselves as subject. In a similar vein, Sarah Lennox has asserted that the postmodern despair associated with the recognition that truth is never entirely knowable is merely an inversion of Western arrogance.<sup>29</sup> When Western white males—who traditionally have controlled the production of knowledge—can no longer define the truth, she argues, their response is to conclude that there is not a truth to be discovered. Similarly, Sandra Harding claims that “historically, relativism appears as an intellectual possibility, and as a ‘problem,’ only for dominating groups at the point where the hegemony (the universality) of their views is being challenged. [Relativism] is fundamentally a sexist response that attempts to preserve the legitimacy of androcentric claims in the face of contrary evidence.”<sup>30</sup> Perhaps most compelling for the new ethnography is the question Andreas Huyssen asks in “Mapping the Postmodern”: “Isn’t the death of the subject/author position tied by mere reversal to the very ideology that invariably glorifies the artist as genius? . . . Doesn’t post-structuralism where it simply denies the subject altogether jettison the chance of challenging the ideology of the subject (as male, white, and middle-class) by developing alternative notions of subjectivity?”<sup>31</sup>

These analyses clearly raise questions about the experience of Western white males and how that experience is reflected in postmodern thought. To the extent that this dominant group has in

<sup>28</sup> Nancy Hartsock, “Rethinking Modernism,” *Cultural Critique* 7 (Fall 1987): 187–206.

<sup>29</sup> Sarah Lennox, “Anthropology and the Politics of Deconstruction” (paper presented at the ninth annual conference of the National Women’s Studies Association, Atlanta, Ga., June 1987).

<sup>30</sup> Sandra Harding, “Introduction: Is There a Feminist Method?” in *Feminism and Methodology*, ed. Sandra Harding (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), 1–14, esp. 10.

<sup>31</sup> Andreas Huyssen’s “Mapping the Postmodern,” quoted in Nancy K. Miller, “Changing the Subject: Authorship, Writing, and the Reader,” in *Feminist Studies: Critical Studies*, ed. Teresa de Lauretis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 102–20, esp. 106–7.

recent years experienced a decentering as world politics and economic realities shift global power relations, postmodern theorizing can be understood as socially constructed itself, as a metaphor for the sense of the dominant that the ground has begun to shift under their feet. And this social construction, according to Hartsock, Lennox, Harding, and Huyssen, is one that potentially may work to preserve the privileged position of Western white males. If so, then the new ethnography, in its reliance on postmodernism, may run the risk of participating in an ideology blind to its own politics. More than that, it may help to preserve the dominant colonial and neocolonial relations from which anthropology, and especially the new ethnography, has been trying to extricate itself.

But to phrase this argument exclusively in these terms is to obscure the fact that the significant power relations for many of these new postmodernist anthropologists are not global but parochial, those that are played out in the halls of anthropology departments, those that are embedded in the patriarchal social order of the academy in which male and female scholars maneuver for status, tenure, and power. In a recent article in *Current Anthropology*, P. Steven Sangren argues that although postmodernist anthropologists call for a questioning of *textually* constituted authority, their efforts are actually a play for *socially* constituted authority and power.<sup>32</sup> He thus suggests that it is first and foremost academic politics that condition the production and reproduction of ethnographic texts. Moreover, according to him, “whatever ‘authority’ is created in a text has its most direct social effect not in the world of political and economic domination of the Third World by colonial and neocolonial powers, but rather in the academic institutions in which such authors participate.”<sup>33</sup> While postmodernist anthropologists such as Clifford, Marcus, and Fischer may choose to think that they are transforming global power relations as well as the discipline of anthropology itself, they may also be establishing first claim in the new academic territory on which this decade’s battles for intellectual supremacy and jobs will be waged.<sup>34</sup> The exclusion of feminist voices in Clifford and Marcus’s influential volume and Clifford’s defensive, convoluted, and contradictory

<sup>32</sup> P. Steven Sangren, “Rhetoric and the Authority of Ethnography,” *Current Anthropology* 29, no. 3 (June 1988): 405–24, esp. 411.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 412.

<sup>34</sup> In their reply to Sangren, Michael Fischer and George Marcus (written with Stephen Tyler) call Sangren’s concern an “*obsession* with academic power and status” (emphasis ours). See Michael M. J. Fischer, George E. Marcus, and Stephen A. Tyler, “Comments,” *Current Anthropology* 29, no. 3 (1988): 426–27, esp. 426.

explanation for it are strategies that preserve male supremacy in the academy. Clifford seems well aware of this when we read in the same introductory pages in which he presents his defense of excluding feminist writers his statement that "all constructed truths are made possible by powerful 'lies' of exclusion and rhetoric."<sup>35</sup>

The lie of excluding feminism has characterized most postmodernist writing by males, not simply that in anthropology. One notable exception, Craig Owens's "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism," demonstrates the richness of insight into cultural phenomena that the conjunction of feminist and postmodern perspectives offers. For anthropologists, his analysis of the message we humans transmit to possible extraterrestrials, the space-age "other," is particularly telling. Of the schematic image of a nude man and woman, the former's right arm raised in greeting, which was emblazoned on the Pioneer spacecraft, Owens observes, "Like all representations of sexual difference that our culture produces, this is an image not simply of anatomical difference but of the values assigned to it."<sup>36</sup> A small difference in morphology is marked or underscored by the erect right arm, a signal that speech is the privilege of the male. Owens notes that deconstructions of this privilege by male postmodernists is rare: "If one of the most salient aspects of our postmodern culture is the presence of an insistent feminist voice . . . theories of postmodernism have tended either to neglect or to repress that voice. The absence of discussions of sexual difference in writings about postmodernism, as well as the fact that few women have engaged in the modernism/postmodernism debate, suggest that postmodernism may be another masculine invention engineered to exclude women."<sup>37</sup>

While "engineered," with its suggestions of conscious agency, may grant academic males too much sinister awareness, Owens's observation of the evidence is accurate: "Men appear unwilling to address the issues placed on the critical agenda by women unless those issues have been first neut(e)ralized."<sup>38</sup> This suggests their fear of entering into a discourse where the "other" has privilege. Intellectual cross-dressing, like its physical counterpart, is less disruptive of traditional orders of privilege when performed by women than by men.<sup>39</sup> Fearing loss of authority and masculinity,

<sup>35</sup> Clifford, "Introduction" (n. 4 above), 7.

<sup>36</sup> Owens (n. 26 above), 61.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>39</sup> Owens notes that writing for women requires intellectual cross-dressing: "In order to speak, to represent herself, a woman assumes a masculine position; perhaps that is why femininity is frequently associated with masquerade, with false repre-

male critics have preferred to look on feminism as a limited and peripheral enterprise, not as one that challenges them to rethink their own positions in terms of gender.<sup>40</sup> “Although sympathetic male critics respect feminism (an old theme: respect for women),” Owens acknowledges that “they have in general declined to enter into the dialogue in which their female colleagues have been trying to engage them.”<sup>41</sup>

The case of Paul Rabinow is illustrative. His is the one article in *Writing Culture* that appears to deal seriously with feminism. However, he concludes that feminism is not an intellectual position he personally can hold. Seeing himself as “excluded from direct participation in the feminist dialogue,” he constructs an alternative “ethical” position for anthropologists: critical cosmopolitanism. “This is an oppositional position,” he argues, “one suspicious of sovereign powers, universal truths . . . but also wary of the tendency to essentialize difference.” Ironically, however, Rabinow not only universalizes, stating “we are all cosmopolitans,” but also essentializes difference when he excludes himself from the feminist dialogue solely because he is male. Seeing himself as unable to participate in feminist and Third World discourses, he identifies with the Greek Sophists, “cosmopolitan insider’s outsiders of a

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sentation, with simulation and seduction” (ibid., esp. 59). See also Mary Russo’s “Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory,” in de Lauretis, ed. (n. 31 above), esp. 213–29. For a broad discussion of the advantages of cross-dressing for women, see Susan Gubar’s “Blessings in Disguise: Cross-Dressing as Re-Dressing for Female Modernists,” *Massachusetts Review* 22, no. 3 (Autumn 1981): 477–508. A suspicious look at some male responses to feminist literary criticism in terms of current interest in male cross-dressing, as evidenced by the film *Tootsie*, is Elaine Showalter’s “Critical Cross-Dressing: Male Feminists and the Woman of the Year,” *Raritan* 3, no. 2 (Fall 1983): 130–49. Male anxiety about the implications of doing feminist criticism was voiced by Dominick LaCapra in a discussion of his “Death in Venice: An Allegory of Reading” (paper delivered at the Woodrow Wilson Institute’s “Interpreting the Humanities,” June 1986). When asked about gender issues in Mann’s story, he replied: “I can’t do transvestite criticism like Jonathan Culler,” a reference to the chapter “Reading as a Woman” in Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism After Structuralism* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1982), esp. 43–64. Freud’s similar fear of identification with the feminine is discussed in C. Bernheimer and Claire Kahane, eds., *Dora’s Case: Freud-Hysteria-Feminism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

<sup>40</sup> Evelyn Fox Keller has described the recurrent mistranslation of gender and science as women and science, showing how gender questions are considered to be of concern only to women in “Feminist Perspectives on Science Studies,” *Barnard Occasional Papers on Women’s Issues* 3 (Spring 1988): 10–36.

<sup>41</sup> Owens, esp. 62. This observation, of course, is well known to feminists who have been consistently frustrated by the marginalization of feminist insights. See, e.g., Miller (n. 31 above).

particular historical and cultural world.”<sup>42</sup> In thus constructing himself as just one more “other” among the rest, Rabinow risks the danger he ascribes to critics like James Clifford: “obliterating meaningful difference,” obliterating and obscuring some of the privileges and power granted to him by race, nationality, and gender.<sup>43</sup> He describes his decision to study elite French male colonial officials as proceeding from this oppositional ethical stance: “By ‘studying up’ I find myself in a more comfortable position than I would be were I ‘giving voice’ on behalf of dominated or marginal groups.” An exclusive focus on the elite, eschewing the dominated or marginal, is a dangerous, if comfortable, correction. Feminists have taught us the danger of analyses that focus exclusively on men: they have traditionally rendered gender differences irrelevant and reinforced the Western male as the norm. Rabinow’s earlier *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco* relied exclusively on male informants, presenting women only marginally and as objects of his sexual desire, communicating through “the unambiguity of gesture.”<sup>44</sup> Ironically, he claims his new work will broaden “considerations of power and representation” which were “too localized in my earlier work on Morocco,” yet he focuses even more explicitly on men. This can be defended only if Rabinow struggles with his earlier insensitivity to gender issues and, in this study of elite powerful males, undertakes that part of the feminist project particularly suited to male practitioners: deconstructing the patriarchy.<sup>45</sup>

Feminists’ call for self-reflexivity in men is related to postmodernist anthropology’s goal of self-critique; when anthropologists include themselves as characters in ethnographic texts instead of posing as objective controlling narrators, they expose their biases. This coincides with the goals of postmodernism as characterized by Jane Flax: “Postmodern discourses are all ‘deconstructive’ in that they seek to distance us from and make us skeptical about beliefs

<sup>42</sup> Paul Rabinow, “Representations Are Social Facts: Modernity and Post-Modernity in Anthropology,” in Clifford and Marcus, eds. (n. 2 above), 234–61, esp. 257–59.

<sup>43</sup> Deborah Gordon has noted recently that not only is the critical cosmopolitan “not clearly marked by any ‘local’ concerns such as gender, race, nationality, etc.,” but also “the Greek sophists who are Rabinow’s fictive figure for this position were European men,” in “Writing Culture, Writing Feminism: The Poetics and Politics of Experimental Ethnography,” *Inscriptions*, nos. 3/4 (1988), 7–24.

<sup>44</sup> Rabinow (n. 1 above), esp. 67.

<sup>45</sup> Lois Banner argued that this is the appropriate task for males who are sympathetic to feminism in her response to Peter Gabriel Filene’s plenary address, “History and Men’s History and What’s the Difference,” at the Conference on the New Gender Scholarship: Women’s and Men’s Studies, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, February 1987.

concerning truth, knowledge, power, the self, and language that are often taken for granted within and serve as legitimation for contemporary Western culture."<sup>46</sup> Yet interest in these questions in postmodernism is abstract and philosophical, paradoxically grounded in a search for a more accurate vision of truth. Feminist theory shares similar concerns to these postmodern ideas, as Flax notes, but feminist theory differs from postmodernism in that it acknowledges its grounding in politics.

The one theorist who has grappled with the problems that arise when feminism and anthropology are merged is Marilyn Strathern, who notes that "anthropology has interests parallel to those of feminist scholarship," which would lead us to "expect 'radical' anthropology to draw on its feminist counterpart."<sup>47</sup> She notes, however, that feminism has affected only the choice of subjects of study in social anthropology, not its scholarly practices: where social anthropological categories of analysis have changed, "it has been in response to internal criticism that has little to do with feminist theory." Strathern seeks to explain why anthropology has failed to respond to feminism as a profound challenge by showing how the two endeavors are parallel, yet mock each other. Feminism mocks experimental anthropology's search for an ethnography that is a "collaborative production . . . a metaphor for an ideal ethical situation in which neither voice is submerged by the Other," while anthropology mocks feminists' pretensions to separate themselves from Western "cultural suppositions about the nature of personhood and of relationships . . . shared equally by the [male] Other."<sup>48</sup>

Strathern thus suggests that there can be no true merging of feminism and the new ethnography, but this contention is based on a problematic formulation. Even the brief quotations above indicate Strathern's disturbing use of the term "other" to refer to "'patriarchy,' the institutions and persons who represent male domination, often simply concretized as 'men.'" This, she believes, is the "other" of feminism, the "other" that feminists must remain in opposition to for "the construction of the feminist self."<sup>49</sup> This feminist need to remain distinct from a wrongheaded male "other" is at odds, she argues, with the new ethnography's desire to get close to and know the "other." But in this latter usage of the word "other," she refers to the traditional anthropological subject of study, non-Western peoples. In her awkward parallel usage, Strath-

<sup>46</sup> Flax (n. 26 above), 624.

<sup>47</sup> Marilyn Strathern, "An Awkward Relationship: The Case of Feminism and Anthropology," *Signs* 12, no. 2 (Winter 1987): 276-92, esp. 277-80.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 281, 290-91.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 288.

ern seems to ignore differential power relations, failing to acknowledge that one term in each pair is historically marked by privilege. She does not see that women are to men as natives are to anthropologists. And, thus, even if as feminists we remain in opposition to men to construct ourselves, it does not mean that we must fear getting to know the non-Western "other." We may, however, be cautious in our desire to do so. Feminists can teach new ethnographers that their ideal of collaboration "is a delusion, overlooking the crucial dimension of different social interests," Strathern suggests, wrongly attributing this insight to the oppositional position feminists strike in relation to the patriarchal "other."<sup>50</sup> Our suspicion of the new ethnographers' desire for collaboration with the "other" stems not from any such refusal to enter into dialogue with that "other," but from our history and understanding of being appropriated and literally spoken for by the dominant, and from our consequent sympathetic identification with the subjects of anthropological study in this regard.

This leads to the questioning, voiced recently by Judith Stacey, of whether any ethnography of the "other" can be compatible with feminist politics. Stacey argues that despite the appearance of compatibility between feminist researchers seeking an "egalitarian research process characterized by authenticity, reciprocity, and intersubjectivity between the researcher and her 'subjects,'" and the face-to-face and personalized encounter of the ethnographic field experience, major contradictions exist. First, the highly personalized relationship between ethnographer and research subject, which masks actual differences in power, knowledge, and structural mobility, "places research subjects at grave risk of manipulation and betrayal by the ethnographer." Additionally, Stacey points to the contradiction between the desire for collaboration on the final research product and the fact that "the research product is ultimately that of the researcher, however modified or influenced by informants."<sup>51</sup> Stacey's response to these contradictions is to despair of a fully feminist ethnography. "There can be ethnographies that are partially feminist, accounts of culture enhanced by the application of feminist perspectives," she argues, and there can be "feminist research that is rigorously self-aware and therefore humble about the partiality of its ethnographic vision and its capacity to represent self and other."<sup>52</sup> But how are these goals to be realized? Has feminism nothing more to teach the new ethnography?

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 290.

<sup>51</sup> Judith Stacey, "Can There Be a Feminist Ethnography?" *Women's Studies International Forum* 11, no. 1 (1988): 21-27, esp. 22-23.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 26.

We have suggested that an important aspect of feminist scholarship is its relationship to a politics. Strathern notes that within feminist writing, “play with context [similar to that used by the new ethnographers] is creative because of the expressed continuity of purpose between feminists as scholars and feminists as activists.”<sup>53</sup> Feminism teaches us to take up a particularly moral and sensitive attitude toward relationships by emphasizing the importance of community building to the feminist project, and it also demands scrutiny of our motivations for research. In their current experimentation, anthropologists need a renewed sensitivity to “the question of relationships involved in communication.”<sup>54</sup> They need to learn the lessons of feminism and consider for whom they write.

Throughout her discussion of postmodernist anthropology, Strathern displays suspicions, like those that feminists have, of its claims to use free play and jumble, to present many voices in flattened, nonhierarchical, plural texts, to employ “heteroglossia (a utopia of plural endeavour that gives all collaborators the status of authors).” Irony, she argues, rather than jumble is the postmodern mode, and “irony involves not a scrambling but a deliberate juxtaposition of contexts, pastiche perhaps but not jumble.”<sup>55</sup>

Strathern contrasts this illusion of free play in postmodernist anthropology with feminist writing: “Much feminist discourse is constructed in a plural way. Arguments are juxtaposed, many voices solicited. . . . There are no central texts, no definitive techniques.” Unlike postmodern writing, however, which masks its structuring oppositions under a myth of jumble, feminist scholarship has “a special set of social interests. Feminists argue with one another in their many voices because they also know themselves as an interest group.”<sup>56</sup> Thus, although feminism originally may have discovered itself by becoming conscious of oppression, more recently feminists have focused on relations among women and the project of conceiving difference without binary opposition. Feminist politics provide an explicit structure that frames our research questions and moderates the interactions in which we engage with other women. Where there is no such explicit political structure, the danger of veiled agendas is great.

Anthropologists could benefit from an understanding of this feminist dialogue. Just as early feminist theory of the “other” is grounded in women’s actual subordination to men, so more recent

<sup>53</sup> Strathern, “Out of Context: The Persuasive Fictions of Anthropology” (n. 6 above), 268.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 269.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 266–67.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 268.

trends in feminist theorizing about difference are grounded in actual differences among women. For example, the recent focus in mainstream feminist theory upon the diversity of women's experiences bears relation to the postmodern deconstruction of the subject, but it stems from a very different source: the political confrontation between white feminists and women of color.<sup>57</sup> In response to accusations by women of color that the women's movement has been in actuality a white middle-class women's movement, Western white feminists, together with women of color, have had to reconsider theories of *the* woman and replace them with theories of multiplicity. In a similar vein, the need for building self-criticism into feminist theory has been expressed with the recognition that what once appeared to be theoretically appropriate mandates for change may have very different results for different populations of women. For example, some scholars claim that antirape activism has served to reinforce racial stereotypes (the rapist as black male), that pro-choice legislation has provided a rationale for forced sterilization and abortions among the poor and women of color, and that feminist-backed no-fault-divorce legislation has contributed to the feminization of poverty. The new ethnography draws on postmodernist epistemology to accomplish its political ends, but much feminism derives its theory from a practice based in the material conditions of women's lives.

Both postmodernist anthropology and feminism assume a self-consciously reflexive stance toward their subjects, but there are significant differences between them. For, as Sandra Harding has suggested, at the moment that feminist scholars begin to address themselves to women's experiences, their inquiry necessarily becomes concerned with questions of power and political struggle, and their research goals become defined by that struggle. This is because "the questions an oppressed group wants answered are rarely requests for so-called pure truth. Instead, they are questions about how to change its conditions; how its world is shaped by forces beyond it; how to win over, defeat or neutralize those forces arrayed against its emancipation, growth or development; and so forth."<sup>58</sup> The feminist researcher is led to design projects that, according to Harding, women want and need.

Indeed, in this sense, feminist research is more closely aligned with applied anthropology, whose practitioners also often derive

<sup>57</sup> See Maria C. Lugones and Elizabeth Spelman, "Have We Got a Theory for You! Feminist Theory, Cultural Imperialism and the Demand for 'The Woman's Voice,'" *Women's Studies International Forum* 6, no. 6 (1983): 573-81, for a compelling representation of this dialogue.

<sup>58</sup> Harding, "Introduction: Is There a Feminist Method?" (n. 30 above), 8.

their questions from and apply their methods to the solution of problems defined by the people being studied, than with new ethnographers.<sup>59</sup> Applied anthropologists frequently function as “power brokers,” translating between the subordinate, disenfranchised group and the dominant class or power. To understand the difference in approach between the new ethnographer and the applied anthropologist, it is useful to look at Clifford’s recent article on “Identity in Mashpee.”<sup>60</sup>

The Mashpee are a group of Native Americans who in 1976 sued in federal court for possession of a large tract of land in Mashpee, Massachusetts. The case revolved around claims of cultural identity: if the individuals bringing suit could prove an uninterrupted historical identity as a tribe, then their claim for compensation would be upheld. In his article, Clifford makes use of trial transcripts, transcripts of interviews with witnesses for the defense, and snippets of information from the documents used in the case to reconstruct Mashpee history. As a new ethnographer, Clifford analyzes these as commentaries on “the ways in which historical stories are told” and on “the alternative cultural models that have been applied to human groups.”<sup>61</sup> Such readings as this can and do elucidate who speaks for cultural authenticity and how collective identity and difference are represented. Indeed, for the new ethnographer, the Mashpee trial emerges as a sort of natural laboratory in which multiple voices contributing to a collectively constituted cultural reality can be heard. It illustrates how the postmodernist emphasis on dialogue helps anthropologists to study native populations as they change and interact in response to the dominant culture rather than simply as representatives of a pure and dying past. However, Mascia-Lees, as someone who has worked with and for the Mashpee in their federal recognition appeal, would argue that it is highly doubtful whether Clifford’s

<sup>59</sup> Applied anthropologists, like feminist scholars, also frequently participate in collaborative research projects, helping to undermine the traditional, and largely unjustified and false, notion of research and scholarship as the heroic quest by the lone scholar for “truth.” Sandra Harding recently has made the point that this notion often obscures the contributions made by women to the scientific enterprise, since what they do, especially in the laboratory, can be dismissed as domestic work in the service of the male scientist. Sandra Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986).

<sup>60</sup> James Clifford, “Identity in Mashpee,” in his *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), 277–346.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 289.

insights provide the Mashpee with explanations of social phenomena that they either want or need.

We must question whether the appearance of multiple voices in Clifford's text can act to counter the hegemonic forces that continue to deny the Mashpee access to their tribal lands. Who is the intended audience for this analysis: the Mashpee or other scholars in institutions under Western control? And whose interests does it serve? Following Harding's claim that feminist research seeks to use women's experiences "as the test of adequacy of the problems, concepts, hypotheses, research design, collection, and interpretation of data,"<sup>62</sup> we might even go so far as to ask whether Clifford's representation uses the Mashpee's experience as a test of the adequacy of his research. Clifford sees himself as rejecting the Western privileging of visualism in favor of a paradigm of the interplay of voices. Yet, perhaps dialogue, even the proliferating Bakhtinian dialogic processes Clifford favors, is saturated with Western assumptions. We need to ask whose experience of the world this focus on dialogue reflects: that of the ethnographer who yearns to speak with and know the "other," or that of Native Americans, many of whom have frequently refused dialogue with the anthropologist whom they see as yet one more representative of the oppressive culture and for some of whom dialogue may be an alien mode?

This yearning to know the "other" can be traced to the romanticism so frequently associated with anthropologists' scholarly pursuits. Traditionally, this romantic component has been linked to the heroic quests, by the single anthropologist, for "his soul"<sup>63</sup> through confrontation with the exotic "other."<sup>64</sup> This particular avenue for self-exploration has been closed recently by the resistance of Third World peoples to serving in therapeutic roles for Westerners as well as by the sense on the part of anthropologists

<sup>62</sup> Harding, "Introduction: Is There a Feminist Method?" 11.

<sup>63</sup> We have chosen to retain the masculine pronoun here and in subsequent parts of the text when referring to individuals steeped in traditional anthropological ideas and practices. As feminist anthropologists have shown, even though anthropology has traditionally included women as researchers, the field has been plagued with androcentric assumptions. See Sally Slocum's "Woman the Gatherer: Male Bias in Anthropology," in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. R. Rapp (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1975), esp. 36–50, for one of the earliest works to expose this bias.

<sup>64</sup> Susan Sontag, "The Anthropologist as Hero," in her *Against Interpretation* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1966), esp. 69–81; Clifford Geertz, *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1988), esp. 73–101.

that twentieth-century “natives” may themselves be in need of therapy, “neutered, like the rest of us, by the dark forces of the world system.”<sup>65</sup>

Yet the romantic tradition in anthropology is being sustained by the postmodernist mandate for self-reflection. For in turning inward, making himself, his motives, and his experience the thing to be confronted, the postmodernist anthropologist locates the “other” in himself. It is as if, finding the “exotic” closed off to him, the anthropologist constructs himself as the exotic.<sup>66</sup> This is clearly the case, for example, in *The Princes of Naranja*.<sup>67</sup> Here, Paul Friedrich’s characterization of the salient features of his own life history connects in the reader’s mind with images of the Tarascan princes who have appeared on earlier pages: home-bred fatalism, peer rivalry, and personal experiences with death and danger. Since Friedrich’s self-reflection was written some thirty years after his initial fieldwork experience in Naranja, it seems likely, although Friedrich does not suggest it, that this inscription of his own childhood history may have been as much affected by his Naranja experience as vice versa. Ironically, Friedrich’s book, which opens up the possibility of demystifying the “other,” reveals that this process may lead to a mystification of the self. In this light, it is hardly surprising that Clifford’s work is so popular. Clifford the historian has turned ethnographers into the natives to be understood and ethnography into virgin territory to be explored.

This current focus on self-reflexivity in postmodernist anthropology is expressed not only in works that make the ethnographer into a character in the ethnographic text but also in analyses of earlier ethnographic writing.<sup>68</sup> Of this process Marilyn Strathern comments, “Retrospectively to ask about the persuasive fictions of earlier epochs is to ask about how others (Frazer, Malinowski, and the rest) handled our moral problems of literary construction. In answering the question, we create historic shifts between past writers in terms persuasive to our own ears, thereby participating in a postmodern history, reading back into books the strategies of

<sup>65</sup> Stephen A. Tyler, “Post-Modern Ethnography: From Document of the Occult to Occult Document,” in Clifford and Marcus, eds. (n. 2 above), 122–140, esp. 128.

<sup>66</sup> On the use of the generic he, see n. 63 above. Here we wish to highlight that postmodern ethnographers, like their traditional forebears, speak from the male/dominant position and have seen self-reflection, collaboration, and textual experimentation as “new” only when it has been practiced by men.

<sup>67</sup> Friedrich (n. 1 above), 246–61.

<sup>68</sup> Geertz; Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* (n. 60 above), esp. 92–113, 117–151; and Strathern, “Out of Context: The Persuasive Fictions of Anthropology” (n. 6 above).

fictionalisation. To construct past works as quasi-intentional literary games is the new ethnocentrism. There is no evidence, after all, that 'we' have stopped attributing our problems to 'others.'"<sup>69</sup>

Furthermore, much of this historical analysis deals with colonialism, affording the contemporary anthropologist a field of study in which it is possible to hold a critical and ethical view. Paradoxically, however, it simultaneously replays a time in which Western white males were of supreme importance in the lives of the "other" just at this moment when the anthropologist fears his irrelevance.

Such paradoxes, which emerge from the wedding of postmodernism with anthropology, pose the most difficult questions for practitioners of the new ethnography at present: once one articulates an epistemology of free play in which there is no inevitable relationship between signifier and signified, how is it possible to write an ethnography that has descriptive force? Once one has no metanarratives into which the experience of difference can be translated, how is it possible to write any ethnography? Here, too, lessons from feminism may be helpful; since current feminist theory lives constantly with the paradoxical nature of its own endeavor, it offers postmodernism models for dealing with contradiction. As Nancy Cott suggests, feminism is paradoxical in that it "aims for individual freedoms by mobilizing sex solidarity. It acknowledges diversity among women while positing that women recognize their unity. It requires gender consciousness for its basis, yet calls for the elimination of prescribed gender roles." Postmodern thought has helped feminists to argue that women's inferior status is a product of cultural and historical constructions and to resist essentialist truth claims, but the danger for feminists is that "in deconstructing categories of meaning, we deconstruct not only patriarchal definitions of 'womanhood' and 'truth' but also the very categories of our own analysis—'women' and 'feminism' and 'oppression.'"<sup>70</sup>

That feminist theory, with its recent emphasis on the diversity of women's experience, has not succumbed entirely to the seduction of postmodernism and the dangers inherent in a complete decentering of the historical and material is due in part to feminist theory's concern with women as the central category of analysis and with feminism's political goal of changing the power relationships that underlie women's oppression. Feminists will not relinquish

<sup>69</sup> Strathern, "Out of Context: The Persuasive Fictions of Anthropology," 269.

<sup>70</sup> Nancy Cott, quoted in Joanne Frye, "The Politics of Reading: Feminism, the Novel and the Coercions of 'Truth'" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest Modern Language Association, Columbus, Ohio, November 1987), esp. 2.

the claim to understanding women's gendered experience in the hierarchical world in which we continue to live.<sup>71</sup>

This situatedness affords feminists a ground for reclaiming objectivity for our enterprise while at the same time recognizing the partiality of truth claims. Recent works by feminist critics of science have challenged traditional definitions of objectivity as disinterestedness and have reappropriated the term for the situated truth that feminism seeks. This argument is well stated by Mary Hawkesworth: "In the absence of claims of universal validity, feminist accounts derive their justificatory force from their capacity to illuminate existing social relations, to demonstrate the deficiencies of alternative interpretations, to debunk opposing views. Precisely because feminists move beyond texts to confront the world, they can provide concrete reasons in specific contexts for the superiority of their accounts. . . . At their best, feminist analyses engage both the critical intellect and the world; they surpass androcentric accounts because in their systematicity more is examined and less is assumed."<sup>72</sup> Truth can only emerge in particular circumstances; we must be wary of generalizations. Such a politics demands and enables feminists to examine for whom we write. Strathern is one anthropologist who has found this lesson of value: "In describing Melanesian marriage ceremonies, I must bear my Melanesian readers in mind. That in turn makes problematic the previously established distinction between writer and subject: I must know on whose behalf and to what end I write."<sup>73</sup>

Hidden power relations constitute problems not only for women and for feminist scholarship but also for men and for the dominant discourse whose claims to objectivity are marred by distortions and mystification. The very fictional forms that in postmodern epistemology are the ideal vehicles for uncovering these power relations actually may tempt the new ethnographer to write without deciding who the audience is. The new ethnography must embed its theory in a grounded politics rather than turning to a currently popular aesthetic without interrogating the way in which that thinking is potentially subversive of anthropology's own political agenda.

It is true that postmodernism, with its emphasis on the decentering of the Cartesian subject, can be invigorating to those traditionally excluded from discourse. Jane Flax has stressed this liberating potential, arguing that postmodern experimentation encourages us "to tolerate and interpret ambivalence, ambiguity, and

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Mary E. Hawkesworth, "Knowers, Knowing, Known: Feminist Theory and Claims of Truth," *Signs* 14, no. 3 (Spring 1989): 533–57, esp. 557.

<sup>73</sup> Strathern, "Out of Context: The Persuasive Fictions of Anthropology," esp. 269.

multiplicity.”<sup>74</sup> Similarly, historian Joan Scott has recently argued that the postmodern rejection of the notion that humanity can be embodied in any universal figure or norm to which the “other” is compared acts to decenter the Western white male.<sup>75</sup> In Craig Owens’s words: “The postmodern work attempts to upset the reassuring stability of [the] mastering position [of the] subject of representation as absolutely centered, unitary, masculine.”<sup>76</sup> Indeed, this seems to be the political motivation underlying the new ethnography, but actual postmodern writing may not serve these political ends. Rather, it may erase difference, implying that all stories are really about one experience: the decentering and fragmentation that is the current experience of Western white males.

Moreover, even if we grant that postmodernism’s potential lies in its capacity to decenter experience, a number of questions still arise. Can we think of difference without putting it against a norm? Can we recognize difference, but not in terms of hierarchy?<sup>77</sup> Perhaps more to the point in terms of the new ethnography, what are the implications of polyvocality? If the postmodernist emphasis on multivocality leads to a denial of the continued existence of a hierarchy of discourse, the material and historical links between cultures can be ignored, with all voices becoming equal, each telling only an individualized story. Then the history of the colonial, for example, can be read as independent of that of the colonizer. Such readings ignore or obscure exploitation and power differentials and, therefore, offer no ground to fight oppression and effect change. Moreover, in light of the diversity of the experience that the new ethnography wishes to foreground, anthropologists need to consider what provisions will have to be made for interdiscursive unintelligibility or misinterpretation. The traditional ethnographer’s translation of other cultures into the discourse of Western social science long has been recognized to be problematic. A text that subtly orchestrates the translation of that experience in the mind of each reader, an interpreter who may be able to draw only on commonsense categories saturated with the assumptions of the Western tradition, is certainly no less so. However brilliant the deconstruction of the text of culture, however eloquent the oral history of the informant, the “other” may still be reconstituted in the language of the dominant discourse if there is not an analysis that “regards every discourse as a result of a practice of production

<sup>74</sup> Flax (n. 26 above), 643.

<sup>75</sup> Joan Scott, “History and the Problem of Sexual Difference” (lecture presented at Simon’s Rock of Bard College, Great Barrington, Mass., November 1987).

<sup>76</sup> Owens (n. 26 above), 58.

<sup>77</sup> Scott.

which is at once material, discursive, and complex.”<sup>78</sup> Without a politically reflexive grounding, the “other” too easily can be reconstituted as an exotic in danger of being disempowered by that exoticism.

Furthermore, the new ethnography’s shift from a scientific to a more literary discourse may constitute a masking and empowering of Western bias rather than a diffusing of it. When the new ethnography borrows from literary narrative in an effort to rid itself of a unitary, totalizing narrative voice, it turns understandably, if ironically, to modern fiction for its models. The disappearance of the omniscient, controlling narrative voice that comments on the lives of all characters and knows their inner secrets is crucial to the modernist transformation of fiction evident in the works of writers like Joseph Conrad, Henry James, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, and William Faulkner, a transformation that coincided with the breakdown of colonialism. As critics have pointed out, authors who experiment with point of view, presenting a seeming jumble of perspectives and subjectivities in a variety of voices, may well be writing no more open texts than classic works in which all action is mediated by a unitary narrative voice.<sup>79</sup> The literary techniques of fragmentation, metaphor, thematic and verbal echo, repetition, and juxtaposition, which the new ethnography borrows, are all devices through which an author manipulates understanding and response. They function to structure the reader’s experience of the apparently discontinuous, illogical, and fragmentary text. Through them, and by refusing to speak his or her views and intentions directly, the author achieves a more complete mastery.<sup>80</sup> Anthropologists seeking to write new ethnography and borrowing this range of devices from literature may unknowingly in the process pick up literary emphasis on form and the aesthetic of wholeness, both of which constitute traps for the ethnographer. These aesthetic criteria invite the manipulation of narrative devices in polyvocal works, whose apparent cacophony mirrors the diversity and multiplicity of individual and cultural perspectives, subtly to resolve all elements into a coherent and pleasing whole. These narrative devices potentially structure and control as surely as does

<sup>78</sup> J. Henriques, W. Holloway, C. Urwin, C. Venn, and V. Walkerdine, *Changing the Subject* (London and New York: Methuen, 1984), esp. 106.

<sup>79</sup> See Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill & Wang, 1974); and Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961).

<sup>80</sup> Shoshana Felman, “Turning the Screw of Interpretation,” *Yale French Studies* 55/56 (1977): 94–208, esp. 203–7.

the narrator of classic works, whether literary, historical, or ethnographic.<sup>81</sup>

These cautions can, of course, be viewed as excessively formalist, as failing to see the new ethnography as more than stylistic innovation. Stephen Tyler, in his incantatory, wildly enthusiastic—though, perhaps, self-contradictory—celebration of new ethnography, labels such a view a “modernist perversion.”<sup>82</sup> To him, the new ethnographic writing is evocative rather than representational; like ritual or poetry “it makes available through absence what can be conceived but not represented.”<sup>83</sup> Indeed, readers wishing to experience the self-congratulatory ideology underlying the new ethnography, unqualified by subtlety or academic caution, should read Tyler’s unproblematized claims: that postmodernist ethnography emphasizes “the cooperative and collaborative nature of the fieldwork situation” and “the mutual dialogical production of discourse”;<sup>84</sup> that in privileging discourse over text it is concerned “not . . . to make a better representation, but . . . to avoid representation”;<sup>85</sup> that it is “the meditative vehicle for a transcendence of time and place.”<sup>86</sup> Tyler says that “ethnographic discourse is not part of a project whose aim is to create universal knowledge,”<sup>87</sup> but rather the “consumed fragment” of an understanding that is only experienced in the text, the text which is evocative and participatory, bringing the joint work of ethnographer and his native partners together with the hermeneutic process of the reader.<sup>88</sup>

However, Jonathan Friedman, coming at this from a Marxist perspective, and Judith Stacey, from a feminist one, are highly skeptical of the claim that postmodernist revision of ethnographic practice is significantly more than a matter of style. Friedman calls

<sup>81</sup> This has been acknowledged by Clifford in *The Predicament of Culture* (n. 60 above) as well as by Geertz (n. 64 above), and has been well described by Bruce Kapferer in his review of both books in “The Anthropologist as Hero: Three Exponents of Post-Modernist Anthropology,” *Critique of Anthropology* 8, no. 2 (1988): 77–104, esp. 98. According to Kapferer, “Present attempts to give voice—edited texts of tape recorded interviews, for example—can be made into the vehicle for the ethnographer’s own views. The ethnographer hides behind the mask of the other. This could be more insidious than in the less self-conscious ethnography of yore. It can be another mode by which the other is appropriated and controlled.”

<sup>82</sup> Tyler (n. 65 above), 129.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 129–30.

for a dialogue that is intertextual, not merely intratextual, since “it is clearly the case that the single dialogic text may express the attempt to recapture and thus neutralize, once more, the relation between us and them by assuming that the anthropologist can represent the other’s voice.”<sup>89</sup> Stacey argues that “acknowledging partiality and taking responsibility for authorial construction” are not enough: “The postmodern strategy is an inadequate response to the ethical issues endemic to ethnographic process and product.”<sup>90</sup> The new ethnography threatens to subsume the “other” either in a manipulative, totalizing form whose politics is masked, or in the historically contingent discourse of each reader’s response. In their borrowing of techniques from fiction, new ethnographers do not claim to write purely imaginative works. They continue to make some truth claims: their use of dialogue is presented as reflecting their experience in the field, and the fragmentation of their texts is presented as mirroring their postmodern condition. As Tyler puts it, “We confirm in our ethnographies our consciousness of the fragmentary nature of the post-modern world, for nothing so well defines *our world* as the absence of a synthesizing allegory.”<sup>91</sup>

This is not true for non-Western males or for all women. The supposed absence of all metanarratives—the experience of helplessness and fragmentation—is the new synthesizing allegory that is being projected onto white women and Third World peoples who only recently have been partially empowered. To the extent that the new ethnography’s political strength lies in a social criticism based on the “sophisticated reflection by the anthropologist about herself and her own society that describing an alien culture engenders,” as Marcus and Fischer have suggested, it is disheartening as anthropology.<sup>92</sup> It has lost its claim to describe the “other” and yet seems devoid of the capacity to empower anyone but the writer and the reader for whom it serves as academic collateral or therapy. Anthropology is potentially reduced to an identity ritual for the anthropologist. If the new ethnography is that, then it must be seen as a facet of postmodernism’s ultimate defense of the privilege of the traditional subject, even as, paradoxically, it deconstructs subject status.

While postmodern thinking has indeed invigorated many academic disciplines, anthropology must reconsider the costs of embracing it. Those anthropologists sensitive to the power relations in

<sup>89</sup> Jonathan Friedman, “Comment,” *Current Anthropology* 29, no. 3 (June 1988): 426–27, esp. 427.

<sup>90</sup> Stacey (n. 51 above), 26.

<sup>91</sup> Tyler, 132 (emphasis ours).

<sup>92</sup> Marcus and Fischer (n. 2 above), 4.

the ethnographic enterprise who wish to discover ways of confronting them ethically would do better to turn to feminist theory and practice than to postmodernism. Ultimately, the postmodern focus on style and form, regardless of its sophistication, directs our attention away from the fact that ethnography is more than "writing it up." From women's position as "other" in a patriarchal culture and from feminists' dialogue and confrontation with diverse groups of women, we have learned to be suspicious of all attempts by members of a dominant group to speak for the oppressed, no matter how eloquently or experimentally. Politically sensitive anthropologists should not be satisfied with exposing power relations in the ethnographic text, if that is indeed what the new ethnography accomplishes, but rather should work to overcome these relations. By turning to postmodernism, they may instead be (unwittingly or not) reinforcing such power relations and preserving their status as anthropologists, as authoritative speakers. Anthropologists may be better able to overcome these power relations by framing research questions according to the desires of the oppressed group, by choosing to do work that "others" want and need, by being clear for whom they are writing, and by adopting a feminist political framework that is suspicious of relationships with "others" that do not include a close and honest scrutiny of the motivations for research.

Within Western culture, women's position has been paradoxical. Like a Third World person who has been educated at Oxbridge, we feminist scholars speak at once as the socially constituted "other" and as speakers within the dominant discourse, never able to place ourselves wholly or uncritically in either position. Similarly, although ethnographers are speakers of the dominant discourse, they know the experience of otherness, albeit a self-inflicted and temporally limited one, from their time in the field. They may be able to draw on their experiences as outsiders in that situation to help them clarify their political and personal goals and to set their research agendas. While it is complex and uncomfortable to speak from a position that is neither inside nor outside, it is this position that necessitates that we merge our scholarship with a clear politics to work against the forces of oppression.

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