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Culture

Introduction: Treading Beyond Objectivism

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DE LA MÉTHODE À LA MODESTIE : FAIRE ET PENSER L'ETHNOGRAPHIE AUJOURD'HUI
FROM METHOD TO MODESTY: ESSAYS ON THINKING AND MAKING ETHNOGRAPHY NOW

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Introduction: Treading Beyond Objectivism

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> *The Enlightenment project... took it as axiomatic that there was only one possible answer to any question*
>
> Harvey 1989:27

1

The papers which follow were first presented at the meeting of the Canadian Anthropology Society/ Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie in Ottawa, May 1989. Most of them were part of a panel which I organized, entitled "Beyond Objectivism: Reflections on Hermeneutics and Postmodernism," while the remaining two, those by Leavitt and Little, were presented in "The Cultural Construction of Meaning" organized by Ellen Corin.[1] That our interests overlapped was evident from the fact that Ellen was also a member of my panel. I gave participants very general directions but I had in mind that together the various papers would help delineate the similarities and differences of approaches linked to the words hermeneutics and postmodernism, hence clarify some of the epistemological issues and choices open to us now. In the event, gaining an overview proved to be a daunting task; postmodernism — as according to its own terms it ought — itself means different things to different people, and anyone who attempts to understand it has to begin with the diverse delimitations of modernism.[2] So the aim of the set of papers has become less ambitious and more realistic, in a sense less modern and more postmodern. The papers explore some of the ways in which the current situation — contemporary ("late") capitalism, postcolonial shifts in our relations with our interlocutors, and certain recent trends in philosophy and cultural theory — impinge on our practice as anthropologists,and in particular on writing and reading, on thinking through ethnography and comparison.

An impetus behind the symposium was the concern that too many anthropologists view recent theoretical developments that originate outside Anthropology as somehow homogenous, as if hermeneuticists, deconstructionists, poststructuralists, possibly even cultural Marxists (to overly objectify these positions), were all of a kind. Such homogenization provides a ready and reassuring form of distancing; any weaknesses exposed in one figure or school can be assumed to apply to the others and we can happily ignore the whole business. Paradoxically, it is the very expanse and heterogeneity of these developments that inhibits me now and that subverts my attempt at writing an introduction.[3] I am all too aware that what immediately follows falls exactly into the traps of stereotypy that I mean to criticize. My only hope is that I do not fall as deeply.

Many of us feel excluded, mystified, or overwhelmed by developments in 'Theory,' that amorphous field that has grown up on the boundaries of

literary criticism, philosophy, and political economy and that vaguely threatens, amoeba-like, to engulf anthropology (all the while inveighing against the authoritarian nature of totalizing discourse). These developments include the challenge to our authority as ethnographers, doubts concerning the validity of our units of study, increased sophistication in the conceptualization of problems, and escalation of the rhetoric in which arguments are phrased. In its crudest terms the challenge is one of competition in the publishing and citation market. Without wishing to be dismissive or complacent about these developments, I think that anthropologists ought not to be intimidated by them either. Unlike the pure theorists and the textual critics we have the opportunity periodically to put our feet back on the ground in the course of fieldwork (even though fieldwork seems to take on more and more of a therapeutic quality) or rest them on the comfortable substantiality of growing piles of fieldnotes. Hence we are able to assert the epistemological high ground — or at least lay claim to the metaphor of groundedness! More to the point, many of the concerns and issues at large today are ones that have been longstanding in our field, ones with which we are more familiar than might at first be apparent. The old notion that we are the discipline caught between art and science, in Wolf's famous phrase that "anthropology is the most scientific of the humanities and the most humanist of the sciences," returns with new vigour. Indeed, Roy Rappaport, the past president of the American Anthropological Association has gone so far as to suggest that anthropology has long been postmodern:

> *The very factors that sometimes lead others to regard anthropology as the least scientific of the modern social sciences — its qualitative concerns, its commitment to context and to holism, its respect for subjective as well as objective knowledge, its consequent emphasis upon participant observation, rather than observation pure and simple, its worries about ethnographic representation, its willingness to quantify tempered by awareness of the epistemic limitations of quantification, its humanistic concern with what it is to be human — are the very factors which suit it for post-modern leadership* (1989:11).

It is the disciplines around us whose assumptions and configurations have changed more than our own. The challenge for us then is less to rethink our concepts (something which for many anthropologists is a continuous matter of course) than to decide whether or in which directions we want to open our boundaries in order to engage in new conversations.[4] It is not clear to me whether it is 'modernist' or 'postmodernist' to criticize the dominant modes of authority. But in an era of decentring, of borderlands and fragments, it is good to recall that anthropology has often been at the edge, a trickster discourse and ludic counter-point to some of its more prosaic cousins; a forager discipline that has eschewed narrow specialization, scientistic reductionism, and a too comfortable position in the academic establishment. Without being self-congratulatory or holding too fearfully to a possibly outmoded identity, we need to tend and preserve our agility.

The authors of the papers that follow are neither intimidated nor complacent. They don't beat their breasts or stare at their navels. They make use of the current ferment to review their practice and to become more conscious of the positions they choose to hold. The contributors pose questions and seek answers in a variety of directions, but the collection is characterized more by shifts of emphasis than outright disagreement among the authors whose papers compose it. If we share a concern, it is with articulating positions which transcend objectivism and which guard against its re-occurrence, yet which do not leave us unauthorized to speak or criticize. If we differ it is with how to delineate these positions, how to comprehend and depict the space between our subjects and ourselves and within which all of us stand.

2

In his essay "On Ethnographic Authority" James Clifford charts the Malinowskian foundations of modern anthropology in such a way as to make a transition with which we are all well acquainted seem oddly jarring. Comparing Codrington with Malinowski, Clifford writes:

> *Codrington is acutely aware of the incompleteness of his knowledge, believing that real understanding of native life begins only after a decade or so of experience and study... This understanding of the difficulty of grasping the world of alien peoples — the many years of learning and unlearning needed, the problems of acquiring thorough linguistic competence — tended to dominate the work of Codrington's generation. Such assumptions would soon be challenged by the more confident cultural relativism of the Malinowskian model. The new fieldworkers sharply distinguished themselves from the earlier 'men on the spot'... whose knowledge of indigenous peoples, they argued, was not informed*

by the best scientific hypotheses or a sufficient neutrality (1988:27).

The familiar charter myth is rendered disfamiliar because Clifford refuses to place the standard values on the two stages. What is being described is a transition which might be labeled "From Modesty to Method." Like any slogan, this one does not begin to account for all the complexities of the process, neither the Nineteenth Century evolutionist excesses of immodesty nor the manifest achievements of the British school. But it does remind us just how arrogant Malinowski was and might make us consider how arrogant we have been. It also serves as a useful counterpoint for one of the things that I believe is going on today, namely the shift "From Method [back] to Modesty."

It is, of course, immodest to draw attention to one's own modesty. My slogan is not designed to attribute exemplary personal characteristics to either myself or my contributors, nor, for that matter, to our papers or even our immediate aims.[5] The slogan describes a broad intellectual shift. What others might decry as a loss of self-confidence, a retreat, even an evacuation of responsibility, I see in positive terms. Modesty is inevitably neither woolly-headed nor nihilistic, mystical nor "right wing." It is one of the most striking characteristics of the thought of both Gadamer and Geertz (and hence the implicit cause of much of the anxiety that their work raises) and it ought to be one of the consequences of the recent pragmatic turn in philosophy and the decentring characteristic of much that goes under the labels of deconstruction and poststructuralism. If at times it is scarcely visible beneath ponderous, obscure, or clever and fanciful language, nevertheless it is present in the message. Listen to Gadamer:

> *Hermeneutic philosophy understands itself not as an absolute position but as a way of experience. It insists that there is no higher principle than holding oneself open in a conversation. But this means: Always recognize in advance the possible correctness, even the superiority of the conversation partner's position. Is this too little? Indeed, this seems to be the kind of integrity one can demand only of a professor of philosophy. And one should demand as much* (1985 [1977]:189).

This might be the maxim of the ethnographer.

3

An undergraduate student recently wrote on an examination that "Just as Geertz writes that we cannot remove the cultural clothing of a human being to reveal a naked personality [in his essay "The Impact of the Concept of Culture on the Concept of Man" 1973], neither can we remove humans to reveal a naked culture" (Suzanne O'Sullivan 1988). The thrust of the argument in going "beyond objectivism" is precisely that it is deceptive to assume that we can ever step outside our own discourses or history to discover what things finally are in a neutral ahistorical framework that absolves us (or our interlocutors) of any commitment to them. It is only in our fantasies that we get to see culture naked.

This condition need not be the cause of great dismay, but the fantasies of evasion may be problematic. I am reminded of the lecture by the eminent (and notoriously immodest) Professor Morris Zapp of Euphoric State University who, borrowing from Peirce, likened the act of reading to watching a striptease performance.[6] As quoted by David Lodge in his essential account of postmodern scholarship:

> *The dancer teases the audience, as the text teases its readers, with its promise of an ultimate revelation that is infinitely postponed. Veil after veil, garment after garment, is removed, but it is the delay in the stripping that makes it exciting, not the stripping itself... Just so in reading. The attempt to peer into the very core of a text, to possess once and for all its meaning, is vain — it is only ourselves that we find there, not the work itself. Freud said that obsessive reading (and I suppose that most of us... must be regarded as compulsive readers) — that obsessive reading is the displaced expression of a desire to see the mother's genitals... but the point of the remark... lies precisely in the concept of displacement. To read is to surrender oneself to an endless displacement of curiosity and desire from one sentence to another, from one action to another, from one level of the text to another. The text unveils itself before us, but never allows itself to be possessed; and instead of striving to possess it we should take pleasure in its teasing* (1985:26-27).

Enter First Interlocutor (qua anonymous reader).

> *...I happen to think that there are serious problems with Gadamerian hermeneutics (e.g. its emphasis on dialecticity, dialogue, voice, etc. with no serious comprehension of the fundamentally holistic, teleological and, hence, ultimately authoritarian nature of these concepts)... Furthermore, I think we can all do without Lambek's [no mention here of Lodge's] use of (nudge nudge, wink wink) belaboured striptease imagery as a metaphor for hermeneutic readings.*[7]

Maybe so, but from colonial postcards of bare-breasted Algerian women (Alloula 1986) to *The Sexual Life of Savages*, to vaginal examinations of the San in the name of Science, what is in question is our gaze, our fantasy of penetration, of mastery. The 'male' spectator, ethnographer, scientist, theoretician, physician, psychiatrist, social worker, archivist, museum visitor, critic, reader, (anonymous reviewer?) coolly surveys the feminized object of his desire.[8] Perversely, it is the object who is conceptualized as desirous, while the spectator supposedly remains unmoved, neutral, distant, and objective, empowered through his ostensive self control. Yet in truth there are no bare facts, no getting to the bottom of things; in fantasizing about their contours, it is actually ourselves, our own preoccupations, that we reveal (nudge nudge, wink wink...). In Ricoeur's words, "the objectification of the other is premised on the forgetting of oneself" (1986:312).

Ethnographic texts, like museums, and even hospitals, prisons, and asylums (*pace* Foucault), inevitably encapsulate and objectify the focus of their gaze. This has a strong political dimension. As Mitchell argues, the colonial order "addresses, and demands, a political subject who must learn that reality is simply that which is capable of representation. Colonial or modern politics will seek to create for this subject a continuous theatre of certainty, unknown to pre-colonial politics" (1988:178). We have been, of course, among the addressees, hence among the subjects of this ontology. Yet we have also been complicit in its reproduction. As the spectators of a strip-tease which we ourselves have choreographed, surely we have to give up the pretence of being unmoved by the spectacle; surely we have to acknowledge that interest flows both ways, that dancer and spectator are inextricably linked in a unified performance, that the dance spins in hermeneutic circles. As Habermas puts it: "At the level of communication, the possible objectivity of experience is endangered precisely to the degree that the interpreter is seduced by the illusion of objectivism into concealing from himself [sic] the methodologically indissoluble bond to the hermeneutic initial situation" (1986:254).[9] And again, "Objectivism conceals the complex of historical influences in which historical consciousness itself is located" (255).

4

Habermas here assumes a difference between objectivism and objectivity.[10] Objectivism is "the basic conviction that there is or must be some permanent ahistorical matrix or framework to which we can ultimately appeal in determining the nature of rationality, knowledge, truth, reality, goodness or rightness" (Bernstein 1983:8), in other words, that with the right Method, everything is commensurable. If we reject objectivism we must try to rescue or clarify some kind of situated objectivity, or, more likely, objectivities — which suddenly become much more difficult to characterize — rather than succumbing to the pleasures of subjectivism or nihilism. We need not agree with Jonathan Friedman's recent polemic against recent trends in anthropology in order to be sympathetic to his aims when he writes, "The discourse of privileged objectivity is the only thing we have that allows a potential change of perspective on reality independent of the market and the state" (1987:166).[11] Likewise, we have to ask along with Barbara Johnson (1987) "to what structure of authority does the critique of authority belong?" These are issues that most of the papers grapple with, at least implicitly. They are certainly problems with which many thinkers are currently engaged and a pursuit we need to join. The whole question of ethnography as a form (or forms) of knowledge hangs on it.

There are many directions by which the problem of objectivity can be approached. One that will certainly be valuable for ethnography concerns reinspection of what literary critics mean by 'realism'; if we can distinguish realist novels, then what about realist interpretations? The first lesson about realist fiction is that the criteria of inclusion change from period to period and style to style, in particular according to the manner in which spatial and temporal dimensions are constructed.[12] We are face to face with the position with which we started, namely that there is no single or absolute standard by which to judge accuracy or truth. 'Realism' is plural. But if all representation is at some level problematic, characterizable, like language itself,[13] by what it leaves out, some acts and products of representation are infinitely more problematic (less realist) than others. As writers and readers, we can make various kinds of informed choices. Is narrative superior to collage? Can the latter be realist? Stoller's paper in this collection advances a few modes of representation without prescribing them. On a more practical level, Levin's paper raises the important questions of what we do when our informants' versions conflict with one another or with our own perceptions and whether it is necessary sometimes to collude with their silences.

From a second direction, the whole visual metaphor, shot through with power, sexual imagery, and privileged distance must be re-viewed. (The weakness of the pun is an index of the pervasiveness of the metaphor.) One alternative is that of conversation and voice. This is described positively in my paper, possibly over-idealized there (cf. First Interlocutor, above), and is, in turn, problematized in various ways by virtually all the other contributors. Another alternative is to recognize the prevalence of visualism and visual tropes in our language, and to deliberately seek out additional sensory and embodied idioms of engagement ("eating anthropology"...) as well as a more precise — more sensitive, more sensible — apprehension of the sensory worlds of others. This is the course argued for by Howes who would overturn the whole textual and dialogical paradigms, which, he argues, are intrinsically connected to each other. Yet the cultural roots of perception lie very deep. As Hoy (1986) puts it, the contrast in Western culture has been between epistemology, which presupposes perception as the paradigm case of knowing, and hermeneutics, which puts forward reading as the paradigm case for understanding.[14] Postmodernism challenges both of these (from a different direction than Howes), collapsing the distinctions between observer and observed, author and reader, high and mass culture. Wary of all binary oppositions, it demands new expressions and new relations. It remains to be seen how far along such paths one can travel.

From a third direction, we must recognize, as Thomas Haskell has recently pointed out in a paper by that name, that "objectivity is not neutrality" (1990). To speak as anthropologists, historians, or feminists we need some kind of critical, situated detachment from our immediate context. Rather than confusing objectivity with neutrality, we need to see how strategic detachment can contribute to broader forms of commitment. How to cultivate such spaces is the problem which Boddy takes up in her paper. Critical commitment is also evident in some branches of postmodernist thought such as the one represented here by Coombe. The general point, however, is that understanding is predicated on self-understanding, hence is not permanent or timeless (Hoy 1986). Understanding must be a form of continuous engagement; "to understand... is itself a kind of happening" (Gadamer 1986:286). There is a challenge here to the modernist oppositions of theory and practice, subject and object. There is likewise a shift in metaphor from sounding depths to clearing spaces.

Perhaps the most basic issue concerns the nature of language. Here is where the strategies of hermeneutics and postmodernism most obviously part company. Where hermeneutics (Gadamer, Ricoeur) regards language as serious conversation, ultimately about the world, certain trends in postmodernism (Lyotard, Derrida) see language as agonistic play, its meanings ultimately undecidable, at best about the relative status of the speakers.[15] For Gadamer language is an opening toward others and toward the world, whereas for Lyotard, "to speak is to fight," though the adversary may be no human partner but "the accepted language, or connotation" (1984:10). And thus, while postmodernism plays with signifiers which have lost their direct connection to external signifieds, hermeneutics still "guarantees that there is meaning to know" (Lyotard 1984:35) (though not, I hasten to add, necessarily to get to the bottom of). Where Gadamer and Habermas seek (in different ways) social consensus, common understanding through discussion, Lyotard retorts that "such consensus does violence to the heterogeneity of language games. And invention is always born of dissension" (1984:xxv).[16]

Coincident with these different, if ultimately complementary, emphases regarding the social functions and potential of language, we see two opposed trends in the textual strategies adopted by those seeking to counter objectivist discourse. One trend, as proposed here by Stoller, leads to narrative, to the evocation of the conversations and contexts through which ethnographic understanding is gained. Narrative ethnography does not dispense with the aura of creation, originality, presence; on the contrary, by filtering the story through the movements of the ethnographer it reinforces the aura. To get away from the confessional form would require either shifting explicitly into fiction or greater experimentation with textual construction than we have yet had, constructing "blurred genres" that dispense with the ethnographer as either hero or anti-hero, yet not with the contingent nature of the ethnographic production (see Stewart 1989).[17] The other trend, advocated here by Little, attempts to undermine the authoritative processes it discerns even (or especially) in narrative. Constructed by means of puns, quotations, ruptures, and deliberate paradoxes, attempting spatial rather than temporal modes of internal coherence, and moving meta-

phorically (paradigmatically) rather than metonymically (syntagmatically), it continuously subverts its own intentions.[18]

In the end there is something funny (odd and humorous) in the way an inflation of either authorial presence or language seems to go along with an ostensible deflation of authority. Modest epistemology ought to go hand in hand with self-modesty and with a sense of humour, but it rarely seems to. The prevalent rhetorical mode is the immodest one of irony (cf. §3 above). While irony may be the appropriate stance when reviewing works of the Western canon or focussing on "ourselves," it is simply inappropriate when describing or conversing with most others.[19] Even with the best of intentions, irony carries its own dangers of exclusion and subsequent misreading,[20] a point brought home in the tragic (indeed, tragically ironic) misreading of the Royal Ontario Museum's recent "Into the Heart of Africa" exhibit. But perhaps the problem lies less with those who would add a level or two of complexity to their discourse than with those who seek immodestly to purify their attempts at explanation.

5

In sum, what I take to be common between postmodernism and hermeneutics is the explicit rejection of objectivism. Postmodernism and hermeneutics share the modest realization that we cannot stand outside our own discourse. "Because we can never make explicit to ourselves everything on which our own understanding depends we can never claim with confidence that our understanding is without presuppositions" (Wachterhauser 1986b:16). While this can lead to a sense of loss of foundations and anxiety or confusion, hence sometimes to frivolity or despair, paradigm exhaustion need not entail the paradigm *of* exhaustion. It can also be the necessary first step in a process of maturation in the Freudian sense of coming to terms with the reality principle (if I can still use such a phrase in this context), a transcending of the fantasy of reality we held in the past. Hence, an existential challenge to come to terms with responsibility and commitment, to accept that our relationship to cultural authority is inherently ambivalent (cf. Flax 1990:9ff.). In this sense, the differences among the various forms of postmodernism and hermeneutics may be analagous to those between types of adult personality, different versions of informed compromise, whereas the rationalists or modernists retain all the confidence of youth in their ability to know the world and to explain or change it. In life perhaps both strains are necessary.

If the postmodern condition is characterized by a surfeit of information and paucity of meaning, and if postmodernism is about the playful possibilities (or pathologies) of information (Lyotard 1984), then hermeneutics is about the recovery of and conditions for meaning(s). The contrast between meaning and information might be phrased in terms of the opposition between tradition and fragmentation, time and space; hermeneutics is (relatively) historical, concerned with duration and continuity, while postmodernism is (relatively) ahistorical, detemporalizing, and focussing on local disjunctures and transnational connections. For hermeneutics, all human understanding is both linguistically and historically grounded (Wachterhauser 1986b:6), while in the postmodern aesthetic the past is simply a depthless archive of clippings for the collage of the present (Jameson 1984).[21] Likewise, "post-modernism moves beyond the (what now seems to be an almost comforting) estrangement of historicism, which looked, from a distance, at other cultures as wholes" (Rabinow 1986:249) toward the appropriability of commoditized and decontextualized signs. In other words, the notion of 'cultures' as discrete, bounded 'individuals' has been surpassed (Handler 1988); at the opposite extreme lies the spectre of a kaleidoscopic pastiche or vast market of transcultural, instantaneous, and universal dimension.

My own view (to be contended by some of the papers that follow) is that postmodernism must be encompassed by or in dialogue with some version of hermeneutics if it is to be positive.[22] I envision variants of postmodernism as the critical second and intermediary stage in what Ricoeur describes as the progression from primary to secondary naiveté, a progression in understanding which is properly hermeneutic in nature.[23] The value of postmodernism is the reflexive self-consciousness about the authority inherent in all discourses, specifically that which Gadamerian hermeneutics valorizes as "tradition." Postmodernism recognizes and participates (at times celebrates) in the double-sided collapse of elite culture and authority — on the one side into mass commoditization and on the other into various forms of resistance. Postmodern arguments demonstrate the discontinuities, diversity, and often conflicting interests within the body of tradition (Brenkman 1987, Coombe this issue).[24] Thus Flax points to the limitations of the conversational model

(specifically, that of Rorty) by noting that it "does not question what sorts of conversation could exist among fundamentally unequal partners (1990:211). But such recognition must be transcended in social practice, in reappropriating meaning. Not even the philosopher has any longer the privilege to be able to escape from the obligation to make meaningful ethical choices. Each of us must wager on certain meanings at the expense of others.

Postmodernism also has the merit of drawing attention to the changing nature of our objects of study and to the implications this has for changing the modes of legitimating such study. In the modernist phase the key issue for anthropology surely turned around the unity of the species versus the diversity of cultures viewed as relatively discrete and autonomous objects. To its detriment, anthropology may have contributed to the naturalization of cultures (but, on the positive side, also to the culturalization of human "nature"). Postmodern anthropology anchors its arguments in historical contingency, local fissures, national and transnational permeations. The unity perceived by postmodern anthropology is a cultural/historical one on a world scale; the diversity is that constituted by various interest groups. To the extent that postmodernists speak any longer about individual cultures, these are simply local sites of production of fluid, commoditizable realms of discourse, riven to the very roots of each of their signifiers by hegemonic and counter-hegemonic processes.

If hermeneutics can be faulted for seeing tradition(s) as seamless and unitary, ignoring the diversity of voices and interests which comprise it as well as the conflicting claims to it and the power differentials of the various parties, the problem with postmodernism is the reverse. Once cultural unities and differences are no longer taken as givens, it sometimes seems as though all that is left is politics. Yet as political philosopher and activist Mala Singh has succinctly reported to me, "everything may be political, but politics isn't everything." To view the world in exclusively political terms is either to disengage from criticism for the fray or to retreat from the fray to a stance of irony (cynicism). To be ironic in this sense[25] is to stand nowhere; hence it is reminiscent of objectivism. Too great a focus on difference leads inevitably to indifference. We must attempt a kind of middle road, call it critical hermeneutics, in which we describe where we stand even as we describe the other. We come then to focus on delineating the nature of the spaces between us rather than obscuring or denying them or simply explaining them (away) in terms of power.

6

The collection begins with an exposition of ideas characteristic of modernism. John Leavitt presents a provocative summary of the 17th Century philosophic roots that underlie central and contemporary positions in anthropology. His exposition has the merit of demonstrating that modernist thinking is composed of two opposed strands, linked, respectively, with Descartes and Leibniz. Leavitt is also able to link both these strands, "our profoundly mechanical view of the world and our bodies, [and] our profoundly sentimental and essentialist view of minds and cultures," to the requirements and experiences of daily practice in capitalist society. In his attempt to transcend the opposition, Leavitt also proposes a useful corrective to the overly linguistic approach characteristic of current anthropological work on emotion.

My paper then attempts to show the philosophical basis of an interpretive anthropology and to respond to misguided criticisms that associate it with extreme forms of relativism, nihilism, and a generally unscientific anything-goes attitude. It thereby pursues the distinction between objectivism and objectivity noted earlier in the Introduction. I argue that hermeneutics, especially as formulated by Gadamer, is an appropriate strategy for ethnography, or rather, that it characterizes what has been some of the best ethnography.

Nevertheless, ethnography must change as the world does. Marcia Calkowski discovers a wonderful example of postmodern pastiche, illustrating ironic aspects of transnational cultural production and consumption, while addressing the question of whether dialogical, hermeneutic strategies are sufficient to deal with the phenomenon of apparently floating signifiers. Ostensibly about the problems of reading and authorship, her paper is also a parable for anthropology about the appropriation and commoditization of voice.

While Calkowski and I explore dimensions of interpretation, David Howes, like Leavitt, is uneasy with interpretivist paradigms, and seeks to turn our attention toward, as Sontag (1969: 23) once put it, an erotics of culture. Howes has some very provocative remarks about textualization (or "literary involu-

tion"), arguing, for example, that the very turn to dialogical ethnography is itself a product of the reflexivity encouraged by writing. His concluding plea not to conflate theory with style is a salutary one.

If Calkowski illustrates the collapse of the social space between the anthropologist and her subjects, the next three papers grapple with the negotiation of that space in the successive stages of ethnographic production. Kenneth Little situates his inquiry in the ethnographic encounter, showing the mutual self-fashioning of participants ('informant' and 'ethnographer') in dialogue, defined here as something much more complex than direct speech, and using his informant's discourse to deconstruct his (anthropology's) own. Enthusiastically embracing and clearly articulating various postmodern notions, Little describes a "mad proliferation of intertextual relations" and argues that the conventional depiction of 'author' and 'informant' as bounded entities conceals the inherent polyvocality of any conversational encounter.

By contrast, Michael Levin turns to the moral dilemmas — and ultimate responsibility — of the ethnographer as author in determining what is to be inscribed in the text. Through a series of illustrations drawn from his own ethnographic practice he demonstrates that representation is always a form of interpretation, one which carries political consequences. These consequences are indeterminate and unforseen, especially as the subjects become the readers.[26]

Paul Stoller then surveys currently available textual strategies. He argues that much of the debate concerning the relevance of postmodernism for anthropology has been misplaced because it has been conducted at the level of meta-discourse, that is, within the realm of "criticism," rather than by means of ethnography. Wary of this general shift from ethnography to criticism, he seeks new ways to invigorate ethnographic writing. Adapting some of the concerns of postmodernists like Steven Tyler, his prescription is not to return to older forms of "plain style," but rather to create evocative forms which do not "claim to know truths" but instead "embody" them.

If Stoller is the most explicit in his criticism of certain postmodern textual strategies, Rosemary Coombe outlines the relevance for anthropology of a postmodernism characterized in ways that go beyond the concern with ethnographic representation *per se*. She argues strongly that a postmodern anthropology marks the final demise of any vestiges of the organic analogy, replaced by a frank recognition of heterogeneity. To be postmodern in this sense is not to reject questions of interpretation, but it is to pay far greater attention to fragmentation, fluidity, movement, borderlands, and, above all, to power and its effects on the production of dominant and conflicting meanings. It is to theorize and describe the postmodern condition, specifically the culture of late capitalism, both its abstract logic and the ways in which people creatively engage commodified cultural forms in daily practice. The paper is a review of recent arguments; elsewhere in her own research on the symbolic capital of brand names and their potential subversion, Coombe takes ethnographic investigation straight to the centre of the postmodern condition.

Janice Boddy concludes the issue with a thoughtful piece on the relationship between feminism and anthropology. Drawing on insights from hermeneutics, postmodernism, and recent developments in feminist thought, she attempts to situate a critical feminist and ethnographic praxis. Her paper demonstrates that the abandonment of objectivism does not require falling back on subjectivism but rather the continuous and scrupulous cultivation of a middle ground, referred to here as "reflective practice." The movement within a middle distance avoids complacency and dominance, but also anonymity and neutrality. As such the paper provides a kind of edifying model for readers and a fitting concluding articulation of concerns which characterize the entire issue.

In conclusion, while we need to be informed about theory, the authors convened here agree that it would be a mistake to go off the deep end (or the shallow one) and abandon our ethnographic pursuits for direct confrontation with the mythical beast of Theory (Truth, Totality, or even Undecidability or Difference). The quarrels among the various schools of thought referred to in this introduction will not be settled in our papers. And to expect they might would be to miss the point. Let us give the final word — actually an opening one — to a distinguished Second Interlocutor, who wrote me following the CASCA panel: "the issue is not whether hermeneutics will hold but whether anthropology will" (Wlad Godzich, July 6, 1989).

Notes

1. Participants of the CASCA panel who for various reasons were unable to contribute papers for this issue of Culture include Paul Antze, Gilles Bibeau, Jonathan Boyarin, Ellen Corin, Andrew and Harriet Lyons, and Gavin Smith. I particularily regret the absence of any contributions in French. The revised version of this Introduction has been written while receiving support from an SSHRC research grant. The introduction has been enhanced by engagement with two Anonymous Interlocutors (who also commented on all the papers) as well as advice and encouragement from Kelly Masterson, Prudence Tracy, Rosemary Coombe, David Howes, Jackie Solway, and Aram Yengoyan. Lectures by James Clifford, Joe Errington, Michael Holquist, and Sara Suleri have also suggested points of emphasis. None of these people will agree with everything written here.

2. Moreover, anthropologists working in many parts of the Third World encounter the paradox that the postmodern is not actually post *modern* at all.

3. Useful, critically informed introductions to postmodernism include Flax (1990) and, from a very different perspective, Harvey (1989). For an exemplification of postmodernist ideas in an empirical (historico-ethnographic) study that anthropologists will find directly accessible see Mitchell's brilliant account of the relationship between colonialism and the truth claims of its representations (1988).

4. Flax (1990) provides an interesting rhetorical model for the encounter with postmodernism; her book is set up as a conversation between feminism, psychoanalysis, and postmodernism, rather than the incorporation of any of these fields by one of the others. This enables her to preserve an enlightening critical distance between the fields and avoids the immodest goal of totalizing synthesis. Flax thus adopts lessons from postmodernism in establishing the goals and structure of her work without subsuming herself entirely within its bounds.

5. Indeed, several of us, myself foremost, are guilty of the immodest, and increasingly common activity of rapid forays into disciplinarily foreign turf. The international consultancy business that sends highly paid "experts" into Third World locations for "short term" studies is matched by the ethnographic poaching of literary critics, and the philosophical ventures of anthropologists. There is also the postmodern tendency, enhanced by the overflow of information and the inflationary tendencies of markets of symbolic capital, toward name-dropping.

6. Less radically, but perhaps more significantly, Geoffrey Hartman has likened reading to "girl-watching" (The Fate of Reading and Other Essays, p. 248). The passage is cited by Culler (1982:44) who discusses the common implicit assumption of a male reader [and hence a feminized text or other] and the different perspectives on reading that may arise when the reader is posited as female.

7. I am not completely certain about the ethics of publishing these remarks by a publisher's reader, and note with some unease that I would feel more constrained were I aware of the author's identity. Yet I hope s/he will forgive this unconventional rephrasing of the dutiful acknowledgement of thanks. Given the increasing concern with polyphony as well as with systems of power/knowledge, explicit recognition of this process of 'un-authored authority' we all live with and reproduce does not seem out of place. I have reversed the order of the quotations; the latter sentence appeared in a commentary on the first version of this Introduction, the former in the review of my paper that follows. The former statement is also an expression of the interlocutor's reasonable concern that the collection of papers does not give adequate representation to the virtues of deconstruction.

8. The origins of the nude in European painting might be linked to the beginnings of modernism. But see also Paine (1989) for a fascinating illustration of changes in the photographic depiction of the ethnographer.

9. Good anthropology has long recognized this. "In ethnographic experience the observer apprehends himself as his own instrument of observation. Clearly, he must learn to know himself, to obtain from a *self* who reveals himself as *another* to the I who uses him, an evaluation which will become an integral part of the observation of other selves. Every ethnographic career finds its principle in 'confessions,' written or untold.... Paraphrasing Rousseau, the ethnographer could exclaim as he first sets eyes on his chosen savages, 'Here they are, then, unknown strangers, non-beings to me, since I wished it so! And I, detached from them and from everything, what am I? This is what I *must* find out *first*"' (Lévi-Strauss 1976:36).

10. Indeed, Habermas is much further from Gadamer's position than these sympathetic comments in his review (1986) of *Truth and Method* (1979) indicate.

11. Friedman defines objectivity as "a mode of discourse [sic!] that posits the existence of a reality independent of the act of its description by the subject" (1987:167). This is not controversial. Rorty himself begins his recent work with the point that "we need to make a distinction between the claim that the world is out there and the claim that the truth is out there" (1989:4-5).

12. See Auerbach's (1953) magisterial exemplification (minus any progressivist undertones). The problem

of literary realism formed the topic of James Clifford's lectures at Yale in the fall term, 1990. One could argue that cultures, as imagined (not imaginary) worlds, that is, as alternate realisms, differ in comparable fashion to the forms of literary realism, according to their constructions of time, space, person, etc. This theme, long present in anthropology and drawing renewed interest from Bakhtin, finds particularly interesting fruition in the work of Benedict Anderson on nationalism (1983).

13. This is a point made by Alton Becker in a lecture in fall, 1990 at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Yale.

14. Rorty (1980), who provides one of the key texts of this debate, argues that we cease to think of speech as a form of representation. Edifying philosophers hold conversations, not views.

15. A general theme in Lyotard (1984) is the pervasive contrast between a lighter-hearted, practical, and more optimistic French view of things and a sombre, speculative, depersonalizing German one, for example between Impressionism and Expressionism. More significantly, of the two grand narratives of legitimation discussed by Lyotard, totalization is identified as German and liberation as French.

    In fact, Gadamer also writes extensively about play, but in a very different way from Lyotard, as a manner of being open to the world. For Gadamer, play is not an act of manipulation or competition but the art of being responsive to aesthetic experience (1975).

    A focus on status competition, and the extended notion that everything is political are also characteristic of a number of both modernist and postmodernist strains of Anglo-American anthropology.

16. This brief discussion ought to be sufficient to show the inappropriateness of confusing hermeneutics with the views of closed language games associated with Wittgenstein. Gellner's conflation of the two (Davis 1991) is not helpful.

17. Stewart's work, which attempts to portray the inner lives of his subjects, exemplifies both these trends. He writes, "In an ethnography of the inside, the ethnographer cannot be hero" (1989:13).

18. The question such writing inevitably raises is, what is the relationship of postmodernism to the postmodern condition; is it simply a manifestation or symptom of the condition, or is it a conscious recognition and critique, or a celebration? For the reader, this is sometimes "the problem of incoherent representation and the representation of incoherence" (Gilsenan 1986:20). But not all positions that could be grouped under the label of postmodernism are uncritical. Deconstructionism at its best provides exquisite readings (or unreadings) that undermine some of the pretensions of modernism but are by no means celebratory of the postmodern.

19. This is an issue that underlies the Gadamer-Derrida encounter (Michelfelder & Palmer 1989).

20. Irony implicitly raises the question of who are the "we" able or expected to read the text *as* irony.

21. This picture does not do service to deconstructionism, for which the picture of hermeneutics might be inverted to read: all human mis-understanding is linguistically and historically grounded. On the formulation that "understanding is a special case of misunderstanding" see Culler (1982:176). On the problems of relating hermeneutics (Gadamer) and deconstruction (Derrida) more generally, see the confrontation in Michelfelder and Palmer (1989).

22. The political implications of postmodernism are by no means clear (e.g. Harvey 1989:42) and are the subject of wide-ranging and lively debate. In what follows I focus upon more positive dimensions, taking postmodernism to be not the symptom of our malaise, the triumph of the commoditized sign, but a new form of consciousness and the possibilities it entails.

23. Compare Ricoeur's famous debate with Lévi-Strauss (1970).

24. Brenkman's (1987) critique is premised on the monological face of Gadamerian "tradition" vis à vis the class (and ethnic, gender, etc.) diversity of contemporary society; but this is less relevant when using Gadamer as a model for the confrontation of different traditions. The issue becomes a live one when differences *between* and differences *within* become conflated, as in most parts of the world they now have. Rosemary Coombe presents spirited accounts of this perspective for anthropology, from which I have learned much (this collection and In Press).

25. Rorty provides an alternate view of the "liberal ironist" in his elaboration of an idealized anti-objectivist politics. Here "ironist" is used to identify "the sort of person who faces up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires - - someone sufficiently historicist and nominalist to have abandoned the idea that those central beliefs and desires refer back to something beyond the reach of time and chance" (1989:xv).

26. For an entirely different use of the same parable it is of interest to compare Levin's paper to the conclusion of Shweder 1991.

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