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POSTMODERNISM AND ANTHROPOLOGY

Elisabeth R. Gaines

Postmodern anthropology questions the authority of the objective participant observer, yet eludes a precise definition. Many different experimental approaches comprise the postmodern stand, and represents a diversion from interpretive anthropology. Deconstructionists peel away the layers of subjectivity from written text derived from observation. The movement presently resides in a whirlwind of conflicting opinions concerning the postmodern style of ethnography. One of these styles, inclusive of anything and everything, conveys a chaotic message, but lacks a truly holistic quality. Some postmodern critics believe the key to fundamental meaning lies in a historical perspective where the subtleties of interpretation and writing are analyzed. It is suggested that linguistic analysis is imperative to the postmodernism movement. It can serve as the starting point for identifying symbols, thereby offering a more penetrating look into ourselves and the world around us.

The postmodern approach to critical thinking is a topic of much debate. This essay explores: first, its relevance to anthropology; next, the anthropologists' experimental approaches of writing postmodern ethnography; and finally, my own thoughts calling attention to the need for the application of linguistic analysis to productively further the postmodern ethnographic movement. This issue is a highly controversial one, not only because a basic definition for postmodernism has yet to be established, but also because the scrutinizing nature of postmodernism ques
tions anthropology's complete history of discourse. Perhaps the discursive revolution is underway.

Postmodernism is a philosophy that attempts to undermine current ideologies and single truths by critiquing anthropology. This questioning targets the most fundamental theories behind anthropology's framework. Its principal aim is to present data with as little bias as possible, decentering the anthropologist from the traditional omniscient, hegemonic format, and deconstructing the layers of conventional method. Two of the leading anthropologists concerned with this discourse are George Marcus and Michael Fischer of Rice University in Texas. Marcus and Fischer state,

> This philosophical critique is most securely grounded in the sociology of knowledge, a questioning of the relation between the content of beliefs and ideas and the social positions of their carriers or advocates.

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> The effect of this style of cultural critique is demystification: It detects interests behind and within cultural meanings expressed in discourse; it reveals forms of domination and power; and thus, it is often posed as the critique of ideology (Marcus and Fischer 1986:114)

After all this has been said, the postmodern approach also poses problems in rhetoric such as excesses of chaotic style, and the refusal to abandon the domineering voice - such faults it had meant to avoid all along. While the concept of postmodernism has been debated over two decades, a consensus has yet to be reached concerning the method of a purely postmodern anthropologist or even the meaning of postmodernism itself. Due to these significant problems the cause of postmodern ethnography tends to be lost in a vicious cycle of critical orators fretting over alleged postmodern text comparisons. A sampling of conflicting viewpoints from various authors can illustrate this situation. The problems associated with these views are then analyzed. But first, the general postmodern objectives will be elucidated.

At first glance, the theory behind postmodernism appears ideal. Conventional, interpretative ethnography, almost exclusively speaks to the reader in an enlightened voice which shouts "I know because I was there!" Many anthropologists believe that ultimately, instead of understanding more fully *the other*, the field worker more fully understands herself. Bruce Kapferer, a critic of ethnography, states that they end up extracting their own selves through the other, and is convinced that the anthropologist's interpretation of the other ultimately discloses his own tenets through them (Kapferer 1988). The interpretative anthropologist enters into an unfamiliar society of people, makes observations and judgements based on her ideological background, records these observations, and then problematically translates her observations from actual occurrence into a written text. Critics of interpretive anthropology, who recognize intricacies of subjective processes embodied by the act of observing and writing, call themselves deconstructionists. The deconstructionists seek to undo history by rediscovering the fundamentals of communication in a domain before rhetoric ever found its place. They unwrap the complex layers of automatic processes in language use which we understand to be common sense. Deconstructionist ethnographers believe that in order to explore anthropology from a postmodern approach, the writer must analyze every aspect relevant to process, including herself and the style she employs in writing.

Most deconstructionists strive to avoid hegemonic genres. Clifford Geertz, a prominent ethnographer advocating the movement, has always disagreed with the austere, analytical ways of anthropology. He approves of Ruth Benedict's effort to explore the manifold realms of subjectivity while decentering any sense of the superior American attitude (Geertz 1973). Kapferer (1988) praised Evans Pritchard's dedication to preserving the alive-ness among the people he studies, deeply sensitive to the loss of feeling that an anthropologically constructed text usually presents. These writers all scorn

the defined world of categories, which interpretative anthropologists inevitably fall into.

Michael Taussig, an anthropologist at the University of Michigan, critical of functionalist and interpretive ethnography, presents his belief, which leads into the more extreme view of a radical deconstructionist method. He feels that totalizing theories are highly restrictive, hegemonic, and even fascist. By warping reality, a violence is condoned whereby the world is expected to shrink and conform back into the writer's own categorized niches (Taussig 1987) .

These totalizing categories include an essential element - language. Because language creates a person's sense of reality and therefore restricts the language user's thoughts to that reality, perceptions of different realities are problematized, such as the one of the "other". Kapferer (1988) explains that we should not only discover the other's world and their own set of ideological formulations, but we should also realize how our own ideology plays a vital role in interpretation as it intrudes upon our views. Though these views all reflect a common urgency for a raising of consciousness, other aspects about postmodernism become quite controversial among writers due to its troublesome all-encompassing nature.

This acceptance of all experimental ethnography instigates much disagreement concerning what is and what is not postmodernism. For example, Kapferer pointed out that while Taussig in *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: a Study in Terror and Healings*condemns hegemonic discourse and legitimacy, he simultaneously seems to command authority. While introducing himself as a radical thinker, he cites distinguished names in his references that adds an impression of significant authority to the text. Although Kapferer advocates self-awareness, he denounces background information revealed by Taussig.

Problems of representation and form cause considerable disputes as well. With Taussig's devotion toward discerning ways of power, resistance, and suffering, he struggled to write and present ethnography as loosely as possible while still remaining intelligible. Unfortunately, the swirling of accounts, according to Kapferer, conveyed an annihilation of meaning. Taussig attributes practices such as magic, sorcery, witchcraft, and shamanism to realms of non-meaning. Kapferer (1988) disputes this imprecise judgement, attributing them to areas of meaning, however they are areas which have meaning only in the contexts of totalized ideologies. He discerns that the style does more to inhibit rather than expand understanding, suggesting that disorder is valued against disorder. He also viewed it as anti-systematic, involving contradictory perspectives.

Robert Pool, an accomplished anthropologist at the University of Groningen, believes postmodern ethnographers do not yet purely exist, and those claiming to be entitled to this philosophy are actually high modernists. He comments on this prevalent chaotic method, "There is no longer a style or a number of styles which form part of a

collective project, but an enormous compendium of styles, all simultaneously available, which can be drawn from" (Pool 1991:317).

Another critical discrepancy remains in that those writers approaching a single ethnography with postmodern intentions deliver conventional messages through experimental styles, lacking depth in historical breakdown. Kapferer remarks that the subject-object dichotomy in the western social sciences remains problematic in their attempt to overcome it. The subjective within "participant observation" is simply extracted from the repressive "scientific" scope and praised, thereby leading us to reason that all understanding is ideological. "Participant observation", the backbone of traditional method in anthropology, is precisely what postmodernism attempts to challenge today. In elevating anthropologists' consciousness, not only of themselves, but also of the implicit processes involved in language and science, postmodernism holds great potential to revolutionize the discipline. Still, the reluctance to explore ideology more holistically, and the inconsistencies mentioned above cause it to be taken less seriously, and impede such a radical movement from development. James Clifford, an American anthropologist notable for invaluable publications on ethnographic practices, concerns himself with postmodern ethnography as well. Kapferer (1988) describes Clifford's focused address of this issue, whereby Clifford examines the terms by which a certain view of reality earns it authority of the event where particular pondering or reasoning becomes intellectually legitimate.

Not only does postmodernism need to listen to all voices in ethnography, but as Robert C. Ulin (1991), another critical anthropologist of postmodern ethnography, suggested it must not be content with only the representation of multiple social meanings. It must also undermine their superficiality through a socio-historical analysis, in order to reconstruct their origin.

I believe the first step in such historical deconstruction lies in the awareness of language. Language is the tool in which we have come to think, interpret, and fabricate reality. It is the medium taken for granted, which we use to perceive and describe ourselves and others, and therefore an imperative phenomenon to acknowledge in this matter. As language is the essence through which we understand, it would be the most valuable starting point in grasping such a complex organism as humanity. Marcus and Fischer (1986:114) realize the worth of language analysis, suggesting that "semiotics, the study of contemporary life as systems of signs, has been a major tool of demystifying cultural critique." Perhaps by initially concentrating on linguistics, postmodernism will not only regain some credibility as a serious and productive method, but will excel into a more yielding analysis into the core of human awareness, where we once began to construct these infamous confining, totalizing ideologies inside anthropological discourse.

Author's note: This essay was written under the instruction of Tony Simpson as part of a 1995 social anthropology class at Lancaster University in England.

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