



Writing culture

Postmodernism and ethnography

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Abstract

In a radical critical gesture, postmodern ethnography emphasizes the concepts of writing, narrative and dialogue against a merely scientific recording of facts. Interestingly, it does not question an outsider's accessibility to cultural space. Instead, ethnographic knowledge is grounded on a philosophical claim on the limited nature of native knowledge itself and is rearticulated by an inclusive gesture which involves the native voice in an authentic expression of diversity. This is a redemptive gesture which fails to interrogate the limit of knowledge and reproduces the conventional ethnographic demand that the other should speak up. Following a deconstructive reading, the article suggests that the ethnographic text should instead open itself to the limit and should remark the radical loss it implies as an ethical opening of and questioning by the other, because this is the limit where the name of 'Man' is inscribed as the name of the native informant.

Key Words

deconstruction • ethnography • native informant • postcolonial theory • postmodernism

Postmodernism is a strange object. On the one hand, it is often seen as a new opening and a new pluralistic method and outlook in the field of the humanities (Lyotard, 1984). On the other hand, it is associated with the logic of commodification and is regarded as the most appropriate category for articulating 'the cultural dominant' of our time (Jameson, 1991).¹ When it is approached within the general purview of modernity, perhaps these two readings are not in contradiction since the apparent dynamic of modernity has always been the new idea or commodity or technology in the market. On this level of generality, the argument for commodification is surely applicable for the so-called postmodernism, as indeed it would be perfectly applicable for the last most fervent liberal or Marxist criticism of it. Yet there is something disturbing in the discursive production of this object. What to do with the 'post' of post-modernism, as it clearly promises a 'beyond' of modernity? Further, there is the obvious fact that the French names associated with it (Barthes, Lacan, Lyotard, Baudrillard, Foucault, Derrida, and

Deleuze) are all radical thinkers, most of whom are read as contributing to Marx's analysis as well as radical critics of its orthodox articulation. Is this 'beyond' then only illusory and postmodernism another new commodity on the market, *or* is it an interruption of the grand narrative of commodification?²² But the question might be rather uninteresting in this form, as if we have already decided what the term refers to. I would like to suggest that the transparency of the category of postmodernism might be suspect. Rather than modernity or its beyond, it might be advisable to focus on the *limit* which this notion of 'post' or beyond promises to transcend or overcome. In this article, I will suggest that the limit in question as well as the question of the limit that it evokes are more intricate than they seem. I would further like to argue that, in order to see the convoluted nature of the limit or margin, we should perhaps look for a rather marginal site, the 'ethnographic' postmodern, where the political unconscious or problematic of postmodernism might become readable in unexpected ways.

THE ETHNOGRAPHIC SITE

Indeed, what is a better site to test the homogeneity of the category of postmodernism than the border that distinguishes the West and the rest? And, what is a better site than anthropology, the science of man and of culture, watching precisely over this border? In the last two decades, anthropology as a characteristic form of knowledge of modernity has appeared to be one of the contested sites in the so-called postmodern debate. However marginal the anthropological or ethnographic debate might seem (especially when compared with the debates in literary criticism, philosophy or psychoanalysis), it nevertheless witnessed the emergence of a challenging, new, 'postmodern' ethnography or anthropology. The well-known collection, *Writing Culture*, by James Clifford and George E. Marcus (1986), served as a general statement. Another methodological work by George E. Marcus and Michael M.J. Fischer (1986) was also an attempt to articulate a similar sense of ethnographic work engaging questions of narrative and dialogue. Johannes Fabian's theoretical critique of conventional ethnography and project of articulating a new ethnographic temporality in his *Time and the Other* (1983) was already pointing in the same direction as well as an important methodological article by Stephen Tyler (1984). Clifford further elaborated and developed the new ethnographic project in his later works (1988, 1997), while Fabian extended his reflections on time and anthropology (1991a) and Tyler his reflections on speech and writing (1988). Last but not least, Michael M.J. Fischer and Mehdi Abedi's *Debating Muslims* (1990) can be regarded as an exemplary fieldwork in postmodern ethnography.

I am well aware that the legitimacy of this category might be open to debate, as the authors just mentioned have varying approaches to a critical and reflexive moment in anthropology and may not all agree on their appellation as 'postmodern' – indeed perhaps none of them would, except Tyler. I use the term to refer to a specific articulation of this critical or reflexive moment: not just a new interpretive consciousness beyond positivist objectivism (such as we already have with the interpretive anthropology of Clifford Geertz, 1983) but a particular tendency towards dialogue or communication with the anthropological other, a particular desire to bring this other into the text, to articulate his or her voice in a more plural anthropological representation. In summary, postmodern ethnography promises *difference* and *otherness* through and

beyond a modern form of knowledge – anthropology – which, we must note, is itself established on a sense of culture as always belonging to an ‘other’.

This is therefore a new moment in anthropology and in the humanities in general. It problematizes conventional anthropological representation of cultural others by placing its epistemological framework within a power structure including its colonial legacy and introduces a critical method in interdisciplinary spirit, that is, an entirely new set of concepts, issues and problems such as power and representation, textuality and textualization, voice and narrative, which find their echo in other fields (such as philosophy and literature). I certainly do not think that the new critical or postmodern ethnography is simply a theoretical and methodological enterprise. It has articulated itself in a number of ethnographic studies which would require more detailed readings which I cannot undertake here.³ Instead it seemed useful to me to focus on what appears to be a series of programmatic propositions, concepts and arguments which are well expressed in a limited number of essays by James Clifford. My focus is intentionally narrow, and I do not aim to read Clifford’s whole work. Although Clifford himself is a cultural historian, it would be inadvisable to deny his attempt to produce a more or less coherent set of concerns and formulations common to many ethnographies in the last two decades because he is an outsider or because he has not done fieldwork himself.⁴ I approach his methodological essays as offering the most lucid theoretical elaboration of the general framework and theses of ‘postmodern ethnography’.

Clifford himself now seems to regard his work as belonging to an earlier conjuncture in anthropology. This is how he describes his two important books in a recent interview:

Books like *Writing Culture* and *The Predicament of Culture* have been part of a ferment, part of something already going on, that has, I think, significantly changed anthropological practices. Certainly those works did not introduce some new paradigm, the ‘postmodern anthropology’ people sometimes love to hate. But the books, and the ferment that made them possible, did raise a set of critical questions that remain on the agenda of cross-cultural representation. (Clifford, 2003: 11–13)

As Clifford also emphasizes, his influence is obviously not a matter of following a number of methodological principles outlined in his programmatic texts. Clifford’s work might be described as *giving expression* to a series of theoretical, methodological and ideological transformations that were *already occurring* in the academic as well as the social and political world. But for exactly this reason, his theoretical texts produced *programmatic effects* in clearly outlining a new ethnographic project, if not a paradigmatic set of methodological principles having a transcendent status with regard to ethnographic practice. This is precisely why his theoretical arguments deserve a close reading. His critical questioning and problematizing of disciplinary borders (e.g. between anthropology and travel writing, hence literature) or of concepts (e.g. positivist notions of observation and writing) are productive challenges of a critical historian and interdisciplinary scholar.⁵ But Clifford went further in formulating a number of methodological statements which explicitly aimed to reconstruct and reform the ethnographic field. His singular reformulation of a new ethnographic project is surely not the only response to these ongoing phenomena, but it is a particularly significant one developed in the context of the progressive Anglo-American academia, since it clearly brings

together, in a theoretical and methodological fashion, a number of new issues and themes significant to many researchers and contributes to an emerging concept of culture in the humanities.⁶ This is why I would like to examine some of the constitutive assumptions of the new ethnographic project as they are articulated in Clifford's seminal theoretical essays (and not his more historical work, for instance, on the relations between surrealism and ethnography, or the concept of travel).

I must also underline that I am not an anthropologist but a social theorist by training and I came to ethnographic arguments through my own theoretical, political and cultural trajectory which began with Edward Said's critique of orientalism and its implications for the social sciences and humanities. If, however, I do not consider my disciplinary background (or lack of it) as an obstacle at all, this is not in the name of an abstract principle of interdisciplinarity as a merely rational academic aim. I follow the track/trace of a singular *problem*, the problem of (cultural) difference, which not simply traverses manifold disciplines but retraces their margins/borders as well as reinscribing and reformulating itself on those margins. The purpose of my article is not to offer a new anthropological theoretical or methodological framework, nor to impose one on anthropology from outside, but to *re-mark*, in a deconstructive spirit, the singularity of a problem at the margin, the cut or angle of the discipline of anthropology, questioning its ethnographic protocols and methodologies while respecting its labor.⁷

Although my article will be critical of the new ethnography, it should be only too obvious that it is written in debt to the event its argument marked: the question of representing others, of who is speaking in a text or discourse in the name of whom and how, as a political and ethical problem. These questions are posed with great vehemence especially in James Clifford's seminal texts, which demonstrate that the disturbance one has with the 'post' of postmodernism is ethico-political, implying a responsibility concerning representation. I would like to demonstrate in what follows that the ethico-political issue of representation proves to be more complicated than it appears, and while postmodern ethnography fails to come to terms with this complexity, we also need to ask what this failure means for the cultural description of the so-called postmodernism.

Because of the intimate relationship between representation and responsibility, Clifford opens his argument by drawing our attention to the textual aspect of ethnographic representation, *ethno-graphy* as writing culture. In his introduction to the well-known collection *Writing Culture* to which several of the names mentioned earlier contributed, Clifford criticizes the narrow sense in which writing is understood in anthropology as 'keeping good field notes' (Clifford, 1986a: 2). For him, this notion of writing implies a concept of culture that is uncontaminated, transparent. It is necessary to examine rhetorical and textual aspects of ethnography, for not only does culture have a constructed and contested nature, but a series of exclusions, which characterized the modern western notion of science, is made possible by a number of rhetorical mechanisms. The scientific text can no longer be isolated, in positivist fashion, from the rhetorical devices that it employs, or the social and historical contexts of power in which it is produced (Clifford, 1986a: 5). In another article on the role of ethnographic allegory, Clifford powerfully demonstrates how ethnographic text is made up of allegories, and how it would indeed be impossible for readers to make sense of these texts if our readings were not allegorical (1986b: 98–121). All ethnographic texts are constructions, fictions, 'economies of truth' through which 'power and history work'. The mapping of

non-western cultures positions the western knowing subject as cultural and political authority. After arguing that ethnography has its own political economy of truth, Clifford reaches the conclusion that 'ethnographic truths are thus inherently partial – committed and incomplete' (1986a: 7).

In declaring ethnographic or cultural truth as partial, however, Clifford makes a universal claim on the truth of truth, and occupies a *universal* position from which he can say that all knowledge, including his own, is partial. Such an argument completes incompleteness by appropriating it as truth.⁸ A concern with questions of representation (that is, questions of who is speaking in a text in the name of whom and how) would require that we ask *who can* actually make a statement in which the truth of culture is declared as incomplete. I suggest that we take the sense of 'can-do-ness' seriously because Clifford's claim on the nature of truth assumes a position of power or '*pouvoir*' in Michel Foucault's original French sense, which implies a capacity to say or do things (Foucault, 1978, 1980a, 1980b; Spivak, 1993: 25–51). The play of universalism and relativism which has characteristically been at the core of anthropology, is not overcome but is rather reformulated in terms of a universally known and guaranteed partiality. Who is the subject of this epistemological guarantee? Where is its institutional, geographical or political site? I will discuss this notion of partiality further later in this article.

According to Clifford, the meaning of a text is plural and polysemic, produced and multiplied by several levels of signification, interrupting the rhetoric of presence, questioning realism (1986b: 100). In fact the notion of ethnographic allegory is both fruitful and problematical. On the one hand, Clifford textualizes ethnography and shows the *complexity* of its representational practice. On the other hand, he desires to give this multi-layered nature of ethnographic text a moral and political ideal by translating it into a notion of plurality. He opens his argument by referring to Marjorie Shostak's popular ethnographic work *Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman*, and cites the passage where Nisa tells the story of her giving birth to a child. Although 'the story has great immediacy' and 'Nisa's voice is unmistakable', we do 'more than register a unique event' (1986b: 99). A long quotation is necessary here:

The story's unfolding requires us, first, to imagine a *cultural* norm (!Kung birth, alone in the bush) and then to recognize a common *human* experience (the quiet heroism of childbirth, feelings of postpartum wonder and doubt). The story of an occurrence of birth somewhere in the Kalahari Desert cannot remain just that. It implies both local cultural meanings and a general story of birth. A difference is posited and transcended. Moreover Nisa's story tells us (how could it not?) something basic about woman's experience. Shostak's life of a !Kung individual inevitably becomes an allegory of (female) humanity. (Clifford, 1986b: 99)

How to read this passage from the 'cultural' to the 'human'? Is this simply a question of mediating immediacy? Clifford *wants* to have *both*: the immediacy of Nisa's voice and the commonness of female humanity – even though he recognizes that actually the hearing of Nisa's voice corresponds to a certain conjuncture of US feminism. Although Clifford writes as if there is no hierarchy between these different levels of a text, in the very performance of his writing he cannot deny the hierarchical organization. There is

nothing in Clifford's reading of Nisa which paralyzes the textual production of meaning. His claim is that the ethnographic narrative can represent the uniqueness of the event of birth. In this sense, Clifford's notion of allegory is what one of his references for the notion of allegory, Paul de Man, would call 'symbol' – a sign which depends on the unity of subject and object – whereas allegory in Paul de Man's understanding 'consists only in the *repetition* . . . of a previous sign with which it can never coincide, since it is of the essence of this previous sign to be of pure anteriority' (de Man, 1983: 207). While symbol denies temporality and finitude, allegory highlights precisely temporal difference. Reminiscent of de Man's notion of symbol, Clifford argues that, in ethnographic allegory, 'a difference is posited and transcended' and that 'these kind of transcendent meanings are not abstractions or interpretations "added" to the original "simple" account. Rather they are conditions of its meaningfulness' (1986b: 99).

While Clifford emphasizes transcendence of difference as a condition of meaningfulness, the text articulates a kind of abysmal limit where Nisa's narrative repeats itself in a strange (un)ending, a loss of meaning. Following the birth of her first child, Nisa experiences a strange feeling of wonder, which accompanies her physical exhaustion: 'Then I thought, "A big thing like that? How could it possibly have come from my genitals?" I sat there and looked at her, and looked and looked and looked' (Shostak, 1983: 194). The 'look' repeats itself endlessly in the absence of words. Does this 'look' not belong to Paul de Man's 'pure anteriority', that is, 'the essence of the previous sign' in the structure of allegory? Can the event of birth be signified or represented? At this strange, unique moment, the immediate aftermath of birth, Nisa's self can not form 'an illusory unity with the non-self, which is now, fully, though painfully, recognized as non-self' (de Man, 1983: 207).⁹ Although Paul de Man is writing about romantic poetry, we can still borrow his sense of the limits of making sense here and acknowledge the fact that there is no transcendence of difference in Nisa's look. The ethnographer, the so-called 'participant' observer, cannot give voice to a speaking subject that is herself captured and ruptured in the *mis en abyme* of self-less organic life. The ethnographic allegorization is not merely a visualization, a *mis en scène*, but an avoidance of this abysmal scene where life is indissociable from the rupture of violence – the violence of birth. Shostak's ethnographic text is not maintained at all but is *interrupted* by the very look she cannot articulate. This is not a new ethnography but the appearance, within the ethnographic text, of its limit. Such moments would be rare, if not non-existing at all. They cannot be produced by an ethnographic program, which is a program of knowledge, of making sense of the other, and they will remain marginal and accidental to ethnographic text, produced unconsciously.

... OR THE SCENE OF WRITING

Clifford's criticism of the visualism of ethnography takes the form of a distinction between textual levels, while the assumption of a *scene* is maintained: what appears other to the senses on the level of description is an underlying similitude by a coherent series of perceptions. Hence 'ethnography's narrative of specific differences presupposes, and always refers to, an abstract plane of similarity' (Clifford, 1986b: 101). This representational process is essentially the same in both evolutionary and relativist anthropologies. Strangely, for Clifford there is a way to avoid this explicitly hierarchical nature of ethnographic representation:

Once *all* meaningful levels in a text, including theories and interpretations, are recognized as allegorical, it becomes difficult to view one of them as privileged, accounting for the rest. Once this anchor is dislodged, the staging and valuing of multiple allegorical registers or 'voices', becomes an important area of concern for ethnographic writers. (Clifford, 1986b: 101)

One may certainly read a text in ways which upset or undo its hierarchical organization, but how can one construct a non-hierarchical text by simply *understanding* the fact that a text is made up of several levels, that is to say, allegorical? This straightforward acceptance of plurality, what we must call a homogeneous and moralistic understanding of plurality, is a constitutive feature of Clifford's argument. Shostak's *Nisa* is offered as a text that illustrates this moral and epistemological ideal. Clifford's reading offers interesting insights into this well-known text, but his 'three allegorical registers' (cultural subject, gendered subject, ethnographic production as dialogue) never encounter any limit to their meaning. Although Clifford finds scientific (generalizing) register in discrepancy with the others, which are more dialogically articulated, all three registers, all allegories return to the knowledge and meaning of an experience in his reading – indeed nothing quite remains irreducible. Generally speaking, his notion of plurality remains undeveloped, since, from a theoretical point of view, throughout his argument Clifford actually talked about *only two* levels: descriptive and allegorical (others are only mentioned). Indeed in other places too, wherever the notion of plurality is employed, there is always the ritual and ceremonial passage of a series of binarisms: recorded observation vs living voice, ethnographer vs native, descriptive vs allegorical, scientific vs poetic. But Clifford resolutely avoids dealing with this *difficulty with the two*, or *binarism*, always insisting on a sense or image of plurality which thus remains rather empty.

In a similar way, in the 'Introduction', Clifford proposes 'a discursive rather than a visual paradigm', a shift away from the observing eye to the expressive, subjective speech and gesture (Clifford 1986a: 12). New ethnography's discursive paradigm aims to include a plurality of voices in the text: poetic as well as scientific, allegorical as well as descriptive, and most important of all, the native's as well as the anthropologist's.¹⁰ The *native voice* is strategic here: it is *an original and authentic voice which is repressed in the visual paradigm*. Postmodern ethnography's aim, its textual ideal, is to *represent this voice in writing*. In the introduction, Clifford quotes Stephen Tyler's now classic formulation by describing it as 'the crucial poetic problem for a discursive ethnography' (Clifford, 1986a: 12). This is 'how to achieve by written means what speech creates, and to do it without simply imitating speech' (Tyler, 1984: 25).¹¹ How does Clifford understand the relationship between speech and writing? In 'Ethnographic Allegory', he also offers a critique of 'ethnographic pastoralism', that is, the fixing of societies in a tribal or traditional past. This allegory of cultural loss (of tradition) and textual rescue (in ethnography) is connected to the story of passage from the oral to the written cultures:

Every ethnography enacts such a movement, and this is the source of peculiar authority that finds both rescue and irretrievable loss – a kind of death in life – in the making of texts from events and dialogues . . . The text embalms the event as it extends its 'meaning'. The fieldworker presides over, and controls in some degree, the making of

a text out of life . . . The text is a record of something enunciated, in a *past*. The structure, if not the thematic content, of pastoral is repeated. (Clifford, 1986b: 115–16)

Clifford argues at length *why this can no longer be the case*. This ‘no longer’ here is undoubtedly one of the senses of the *post*-modern, its assumption of an external historical limit. Clifford gives a fine description of this set of conditions. First of all, the ethnographer is not the sole or primary bringer of culture into writing, hence the intertextual predicament; secondly, informants increasingly read and write; thirdly, tribal peoples become increasingly literate. And lastly, Clifford argues, Jacques Derrida has shown us that writing is not tied to alphabetic writing but must be considered as ‘the broad range of marks, spatial articulations, gestures and other inscriptions at work in human cultures’ and has extended ‘the definition of the “written”, in effect smudging its clear distinction from the “spoken”’ (Clifford, 1986b: 117). This ‘broad’ description is closer to Leroi-Gourhan’s concept of writing than Derrida’s.¹² The latter offers no definition of writing and his concept of writing depends on the notion of ‘*graphematicity*’ – markability. Clifford’s confusion is not without reasons, as we will see in a moment. He rightly points out that, for Derrida, ethnographic writing cannot be seen as ‘an exterior imposition on a “pure”, unwritten oral/aural universe’ (Clifford, 1986b: 118). We must therefore see ethnographic writing as ‘more complex’; the status of the ethnographer who brings the culture into writing is undercut. Clifford asks:

Who, in fact, writes a myth that is recited into a tape recorder, or copied down to become part of field notes? Who writes (in a sense going beyond transcription) an interpretation of custom produced through intense conversations with knowledgeable native collaborators? (1986b: 118)

This must also be the difficulty in a book such as Shostak’s *Nisa*, in which Nisa’s ‘own’ voice is put into writing by Shostak as we have seen in the example given earlier. When Clifford asks ‘who writes’, he means which of the two subjects, the anthropologist or the native? If anthropology is a knowledge predicated on the native, indeed the whole anthropological text is written by him or her – even though this writing is denied to the native. By assuming an opposition between transcription and interpretation while wishing to transform the native’s status from object to subject, Clifford seems to move within a traditional concept of writing. In deconstruction, however, generalized writing is not just writing in the broad sense but also a concept which refers to an *irrecoverable* loss. In other words, what is important in any text, including the ethnographic text, is not only what is inscribed but also what cannot be inscribed. Nisa’s uncanny expression noticed and registered by Shostak (. . . looked and looked and looked’) *points to* something without being able to signify it and thus opens the text into a generalized loss. Such a loss is also singular, and such a singularity is, in our case, the singularity of the event of birth. While such a singular affect can only be brought up in the text, there is also a sense in which no text can signify it (otherwise Clifford would not be speaking of the ‘immediacy’ of this ‘unique event’). But Clifford’s impulsive concern with ‘who speaks’ in the text or ‘who writes’ the text seems to have been guided by a moral anxiety of giving voice to the other rather than a careful marking of this singular moment. Hence his translation of textual complexity into a moral ideal of plurality. This is a

recuperative strategy of representation, which moves, in a single gesture, from suppressing the loss to the conjuring up of a textual plurality. Derrida's argument would be against precisely this gesture of attaching the loss to the pathos of the arrival of writing or representation. While Derrida generalizes the loss within the economy of writing, Clifford's theoretical gesture is redemptive, accommodating speech within ethnographic representation and thus transcending the limit in favor of a redemptive pluralism.¹³

In his more recent work, *Routes*, Clifford articulates the same ideal as follows:

The staging of translated, edited 'voices', to produce a 'polyphonic' authority has never been an unproblematic exercise. But represented voices can be powerful indices of a living people – more so even than photographs, which however realistic and contemporary, always evoke a certain irreducible past tense. And to the extent that quotations are attributed to discrete individuals, they can communicate a sense of indigenous *diversity*. (1997: 167)¹⁴

Clifford's aim is not to problematize the ethnographic text here, but to convince the anthropologist to *adopt* this supposedly postmodern invention, just as he said for the allegorical or multi-layered structure of text. In a characteristic statement, he already formulated this in his introduction to *Writing Culture*: 'once accepted and built into ethnographic art, a rigorous sense of partiality can be a source of representational tact' (1986a: 7) and 'once dialogism and polyphony are regarded as modes of textual production, monophonic authority is questioned, revealed to be characteristic of a science that has claimed to *represent* cultures' (1986a: 15). This moment marks an important shift in postmodern ethnography's argument. In arguing that ethnography is writing, Clifford emphasizes that it constructs, fabricates truth and knowledge rather than simply representing facts. In his attempt to include the native informant's voice, however, he offers a new 'diplomatic' strategy of representation in which this voice is *marked* as such. Changing the strategy of representation from an exclusionary to an inclusionary one fails to interrogate the very *place* in which the other is included. Is this not the place from which Clifford announces that all truth is partial? New ethnography's appeal to notions of experience and voice depends on the assumption that an authentic expression of cultural diversity is possible. But this attempt to repair the exclusion fails to interrogate the very demand that the 'other' should speak up – a conventional anthropological/ethnographic demand.¹⁵ This inclusion of the 'native voice' is postmodern ethnography's stronghold, the very stake of its claim to be different from conventional ethnography. As we again learn from Jacques Derrida's deconstruction, this problematic of voice assumes a conventional concept of human subject, according to which *the human subject can bring his or her experience back in speech* (1973, 1976). The *post*-modern graphing of culture is *not* beyond or outside what Derrida has called western metaphysics.

AT THE THRESHOLD OF KNOWLEDGE

I would like to explore the thesis of incompleteness/partiality a little further. Although my earlier criticism of Clifford's notion of incompleteness is logical, perhaps he must be granted a concept of incompleteness in the sense of a processual incompleteness, hence maintaining a possibility of working out or elaboration understood in the Gramscian sense.¹⁶ Although Clifford might agree with this, such an agreement should certainly

require a recomposition of his argument for he uses the notions of partiality and incompleteness interchangeably. But the further difficulty is that Clifford's argument is ordered by an epistemological and methodological desire for a new, better and inclusive discourse. If the course of knowledge and culture follows Clifford in his good intention, such a position should leave room for others to speak, include them, give them recognition and recognize their 'proper' selves. Can this project of re-appropriation produce its desired effect? Such an effect is only possible on the condition that it remains blind to the other's resistance to subjectivation. This irreducibility of the otherness of the other, and of the relation to the other is called *ex-appropriation* by Derrida.¹⁷ By the concept of ex-appropriation, Derrida is not referring to excluding, disappropriating or expropriating others, to deprive them of the ownership of their selves or property, but the other's radical resistance to the knowing and speaking subject's self, discourse, or knowledge so that it becomes impossible for the subject to totalize and to appropriate. The question here is not a question of the other, nor a question of understanding the other or letting the other speak, but a question of the knowing subject. Focusing on such a moment of ex-appropriation or of the impossibility of appropriation is therefore not an irrelevant, irresponsible intellectual point at all, it is the ethico-political opening itself. Because it is at such a point that the discourse or text is ruptured, this is the moment of keeping it open to others and otherness. This point or moment (of deconstruction) *happens*, or better put, it is in the structure of our experience.¹⁸

I should begin by following Clifford's argument. If no individual member of a culture can fully retrieve cultural knowledge in his/her consciousness as postmodern ethnography insists, this does not necessarily mean that his/her knowledge is partial with respect to a universal 'truth of culture'. This is surely the old problem of relativism, which I have already pointed out in this article. But it is also more than that. Clifford offers a good example of his notion of the partiality of cultural truth/knowledge:

Ethnographers are more and more like the Cree hunter who (the story goes) came to Montreal to testify in court concerning the fate of his hunting lands in the new James Bay hydroelectric scheme. He would describe his way of life. But when administered the oath he hesitated: 'I am not sure I can tell the truth . . . I can only tell what I know'. (1986a: 8)

The new ethnographer wishes to see himself in the position of the Cree hunter. His model of partial knowledge is rooted in the very partiality and incompleteness of cultural knowledge itself. However, what is at stake in the Cree hunter's admission is not simply the partiality or incompleteness of his knowledge in the quasi-philosophical, general and universal sense Clifford means when he writes that 'all knowledge is partial'. Troubled and distressed by the pressure of a system based on an *appropriative* relationship to a finalistic truth, the Cree hunter can but react to what the legal procedure demands from him ('truth, nothing but the truth'). It is this particular confrontation which compels him to admit the limited and particular nature of his knowledge, a strategic move in a particular context of power. But since Clifford offers this example as an instance of cultural knowledge in general, he must be responded to on this level. The hunter's position may not be as transparent as it seems. For, in necessarily admitting the limit, he is now in *performative possession* of it: *he knows* that he does not know. This is an

inevitable entanglement that emerges as a result of being inserted into the interrogative abstract syntax of law and language.¹⁹ This is why, rather than simply accepting the limited nature of knowledge (which might be a hidden acceptance of the law of culture), it might be more advisable to ask what this limit of knowledge is. But the query of the being (the 'is') of the limit of knowledge delivers no straightforward answer. Maurice Blanchot draws our attention to how knowledge is bound to miss its limit:

There is an 'I do not know' that is at the limit of knowledge but that belongs to knowledge. We always pronounce it too early, still knowing all – or too late, when I no longer know that I do not know. (Blanchot quoted in Taylor, 1986: 1)²⁰

In order to see the relevance of Blanchot's deconstruction of the (non)knowledge of the limit of knowledge, I need to return to a well-known definition of collective knowledge. Cultural or social, that is, collective/communal knowledge, is often seen as inscribed in body, words, and actions, constituting a level of language that is not readily available to consciousness but is perhaps 'known' in a different, sort of intuitive way. This is what is often meant by the tacit character of such knowledge – which also implies the paradoxical sense of a nativity outside consciousness. Although Pierre Bourdieu would appear a rather conventional figure from a postmodern ethnographic perspective – as he has, for instance, no manifest desire to articulate a native voice in his text – he is attentive to precisely such a complexity. In an important methodological criticism and a kind of warning to the ethnographer, he complicates the widely accepted definition of collective knowledge by introducing into it the very subject who is supposed to know it and can therefore appropriate it. I am referring to his definition of 'class habitus'. In Bourdieu's text, this appears as a criticism of American symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology:

interpersonal relations are never, except in appearance, individual-to-individual relationships and the truth of an interaction is never entirely contained in the interaction. (Bourdieu, 1989: 81)

Surely no ethnography can overlook this careful warning. But what is at stake here may not be transparent either. For Bourdieu's useful critical warning about an outsider's accessibility to cultural or social space is made possible by the conventional epistemological figure of 'appearance vs truth'. Does this philosophical language not assume that there is some kind of access to the truth of a collectivity, that there is a 'first interaction' in which this truth is present? Bourdieu's philosophically learned, sophisticated and vigilant text would *not easily* yield to this interpretation. The French sociologist produced his concept of 'habitus' by introducing philosophical elaborations (especially on time and body) which he borrowed from a strange mixture of 17th-century rationalism and modern phenomenology (Leibniz, Spinoza, Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty) and used to rewrite classical social theories (Marx, Weber, Durkheim). This singular theoretical operation has the great merit of drawing our attention to the embodied, inscribed and fluctuating nature of sociality. But Bourdieu's endless and circular redefinitions and elaborations of habitus, which is marked by his desire to offer a methodologically more refined understanding of sociality *beyond* binarisms of 'subject

vs object' or 'structure vs agency', can also be read as instances of a symptomatic, though often productive, failure. A founding cognitive desire, consistent with the phenomenological tradition he follows, marks Bourdieu's notion of past as an *originary* past that was *once present*. This becomes clear in the definition of the past as a *present past*, when, for instance, Bourdieu agrees with Durkheim that 'it is yesterday's man who inevitably predominates in us' (1989: 79). The belief in knowledge stored in a (present) past makes it difficult to think the necessary failure of (non)knowledge and to attend to the radical impossibility articulated in Blanchot's uncanny statement. If only the past were a radical or absolute past, that is to say if only it were a past that has never been present (as we learn, for instance, from Gilles Deleuze's reading of Bergson²¹), then we would have a chance to take note of such a limit. Bourdieu's cautionary remark must therefore be *supplemented* by the deconstruction of the philosophical tradition he follows. Especially Jacques Derrida's deconstruction has demonstrated the impossibility of an originary experience present to itself.²² If collective/communal or cultural knowledge is one that comes in experience, then it must be kept in mind that there is an aspect to all experience which remains irreducible to presence, but is related to absence and loss. Following Derrida then, I suggest that we approach collective/communal knowledge as always subjected to an absolute past: *a past that has never been present* – yet a past that is *always here without being present*. This absolute past or *différance* produces differences, spacing them, while withdrawing 'itself' from the differences it produces. In Derrida's own words, 'if *différance* is (and I also cross out the is) what makes possible the presentation of the being-present, it is never presented as such' (1982: 6). This loss is also what I have lost at the limit of knowledge in Blanchot's attentive thinking: the limit whose movement I necessarily miss when I admit my ignorance while still remaining within knowledge. One does not have to regard this limit experience as negative at all, since the limit is always already on the move. It is an opening where the knowing subject (or the subject of discourse) is *exposed* to an infinite questioning, and not to a transcendental signified (the meaning of birth, of what the 'other' says or desires and so on).

Postmodern ethnography's attempt at appropriating plurality and otherness in an ethnographic text is therefore necessarily mistaken, for the subject of such a project is constituted in imaginary appropriation of the limit of knowledge. This is a failure to remark the limit rather than opening up of the text to that limit. As a result, postmodern ethnography's pluralist and relativist rhetoric is the discursive articulation of a (re-appropriative) project of *information retrieval*.²³ Not unsurprisingly, this apparently pluralist project turns out to depend on a moralistic dichotomy between a 'bad' (unfair, excluding) representation and a 'good' (fair, inclusive) one. It is not for nothing that in his critical reading of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, Clifford dismisses Said's definition of orientalism as a discourse of power/knowledge and redefines it in terms of an orientalist 'tradition' (1988: 268). This neutralization enables him to claim that there is a good, well-intended and sympathetic orientalism as well as a bad, racist one. However, this is unavoidably giving intention priority and purity, thus paradoxically willing (as unintended as such a will is) a reduction of the material production and placing of one's own intentionality and subjectivity in and by a textual network. Would it not be more meaningful for the scholar to admit and fight the necessary possibility of complicity, instead of finding relief in good intention?²⁴ This humanist strategy does not question the subject of knowledge and the place of representation. While apparently

withdrawing himself/herself in order to leave room for the other to speak his/her truth, does the subject of postmodern ethnography not *protect* his/her position of authority in terms of a manager of partial truths, the diplomatic proprietor of the universal truth of culture as 'partial'?

THE INSCRIPTION OF MAN

Jacques Derrida's vigilant reading reveals the double meaning of the old Greek word '*problema*': it might be 'the projection of a project' but also 'the protection created by a substitute, a prosthesis that we put forth in order to represent, replace, shelter or dissimulate ourselves, or so as to hide something *unavowable* – like a shield' (Derrida, 1993: 11–12; my emphasis). Is the postmodern ethnographic project, that is, 'the problem of "how to achieve by written means what speech creates, and to do it without simply imitating speech"' in the above formulation, also a shield, protecting the oldest *anthropological* desire? And if so, what is *unavowable* here? What is it that the anthropological profession of faith cannot profess? I would like to argue that it is an infrastructural textual or inscriptive economy as well as a certain economy of desire which are at work in the postmodern ethnographic demand for authentic voice.

In *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* Gayatri Spivak makes the astonishing suggestion that we read 'the encrypting of the name of the native informant *as the name of Man* – a name that carries the inaugurating affect of being human' (1999: 5). Spivak's formulation supports and further complicates my earlier description of postmodern ethnography as *information retrieval*. How to read the new ethnographer's desire to make the native voice heard in the text, to make the native one of the signatories of the anthropological text? Following Spivak, we may consider the possibility that this desire is itself the dissembling of an unacknowledged loss. As a knowledge predicated on the native informant, anthropology is Western Subject's/Man's coding of the untranslatability of *his* origin. This untranslatability remarks the very limit that the transcription or transliteration of the native voice is supposed to overcome.

Although information retrieval is conventionally defined as 'the tracing of information stored in books, computers, or other collections of reference material' (*Oxford English Dictionary*), such a tracing or graphing is not only the following of a predetermined route or the copying of a pre-existing figure, but leaving *your own trace* as well. The computer expert encodes information in order to be able to retrieve the previously lost information. Perhaps the inscription of the native voice must be regarded as transliteration rather than transcription. Simultaneously 'foreclosed and needed' in Spivak's words (1999: 6), the retrieved (re-appropriated) voice of the native other is only a further encrypting of the name of Man, maintaining the *untranslatability* of his origin. I should immediately add: in the postmodern, *the name of Man as displaced subject* (and no longer the subject of evolution). The sense of 'displacement' here is both theoretical (an apparently 'non-essentialist' humanism: a reversal of essentialism which defines the essence of Man/Subject as displaced) and cultural or geographical – hence the popularity of the notion of hybridity which brings these two senses together. This last point, however, would require further reading which goes beyond the scope and limit of my present argument.

This sense of geographical and cultural 'displacement' is emphatically articulated in Clifford's more recent work, *Routes* (1997).²⁵ In his 'Prologue', Clifford repeats the same

methodological argument for the partiality of knowledge from a different angle. In a characteristic statement, he writes that 'full accountability, of course, like the dream of self-knowledge, is elusive' (Clifford, 1997: 11). As I have already argued in this article, the methodological binary opposition between fullness and partiality hides the pre-supposition of a knowing subject, whether fully or partially knowing. But more importantly, Clifford introduces a new term, 'translation', in the context of what he calls 'comparative cultural studies' (1997: 35). In arguing for the located nature of thinking in both space and time, he describes a location as 'an itinerary rather than a bounded site – a series of encounters and translations' – and he suggests a 'situated analysis' which is 'inherently partial'. This kind of analysis 'assumes that all broadly meaningful concepts, terms such as travel, are translations built from imperfect equivalences', and comparative or translation terms are 'approximations' (Clifford, 1997: 11). In an effort to provide a balanced account, Clifford writes that 'in successful translation . . . something different is brought over, made available for understanding, appreciation, consumption. At the same time . . . the moment of failure is inevitable' (1997: 182–3). The idea of translation as an imperfect equivalence or approximation, or the idea of 'partial translatability' (Clifford, 1997: 272), seems to indicate an approach which takes cultural difference into account, since it accepts that perfect or full translation is impossible. But it also assumes that there is a native speaker who can fully express him/herself in his/her native language. This assumption of a homogeneous original language translatable to itself is a conventional idea of translation and, by implication, of linguistic and cultural difference.

Although Clifford wants to see himself 'in the tradition of Walter Benjamin's cultural criticism' (1997: 10) and 'in a lineage of Brechtian or Benjaminian modernism' (1997: 182), it was precisely this apparently simple yet rather confused idea of 'imperfect translation' that Walter Benjamin criticized in his well-known essay, 'The Task of the Translator' (1968: 69–82). Indeed Benjamin begins by criticizing the very idea that translation is meant for the readers who do not understand, in other words, foreigners. For Benjamin, translation is a literary 'mode' and the law governing it is 'translatability' (1968: 70). The complex notion of translatability is not the same as translation: the former is what makes the latter *possible and impossible at the same time*. Translatability presumes the difference of languages as already contained within a single language, and refers to a movement in the original language which is most aptly described by Blanchot in his own essay on Benjamin as 'a gesture toward another language or . . . the possibilities of being different from itself and foreign to itself' (Blanchot, 1997: 59). It is in this sense that, for Benjamin, translation involves 'the foreignness of languages' (1968: 75). When Clifford refers to a necessarily imperfect translation, this seems to him to be a natural fact of cultural or linguistic difference. For Benjamin, however, if translation is impossible, it is not that a language is necessarily incompletely translated, but rather that there is *never one* language in a language, in other words, every language is, in a sense, a translation from another, unknown language. I should go so far as to say that this kind of approach opens language to a cryptic reading in the sense that the psychoanalysts Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok understand (1986, 1994). Elaborating the psychoanalytic notions of shell and kernel, Abraham and Torok argue that, although the cryptic nature of unconscious language implies a kernel (an unknown language) for which the known or manifest language should stand as an external shell, the relationship between

the shell and the kernel is not so simple. There is a dynamic, 'cryptonymic' movement between the shell and the kernel on the very border where they touch and separate from each other. This can be described as a movement involving *alterity* (rather than pure identity or pure virginity). Is it not precisely this which Benjamin calls the 'sacred' character of language, its idiomatic nature which makes translation both necessary and impossible? If, as Benjamin argues, the original text is like the sacred text, absolutely original and absolutely untranslatable (because the two flows of the letter and the meaning are indissociable), there is also, as Derrida shows in his reading of Benjamin, 'an "intralineal" translation into one's own language of the sacred text' and a movement of 'pure translatability' makes it possible to 'read between the lines' (Derrida, 1988: 104).

Moreover, for Benjamin, this movement has to do with the *life* of language, what Derrida calls its 'surviving structure'. Translating is responding to this demand for survival which, as Derrida shows, is the very *structure* of the original text. Once more, translation has nothing to do with communication, reception or information, whether full or partial. Rather it 'augments and modifies the original, which, insofar as it is living on, never ceases to be transformed and to grow' (Derrida, 1988: 122). It is in this way that translation reveals what Benjamin called 'the kinship of languages'. It is not a question of constituting a whole that is already given as a unity of its parts, but rather constituting a whole as itself a fragment in a series of fragments which remain separate. This is not quite Clifford's redemptive polyphony which aims to restore the immediacy of an original and authentic native voice, since, in Benjamin, linguistic difference is articulated immanently by the notion of a linguistic original that, in its movement, is always already foreign to its own sentences, and forever remaining out of the reach of its very own production.

Interestingly, by the concept of an 'imperfect translation', Clifford undermines his own powerful criticism of 'salvage ethnography' – the benevolent anthropologist's project of saving the vanishing primitive (Clifford, 1986b: 111–19). Salvage ethnography fixes a society in an ethnographic present which is a past (an operation which depends on the 'post-Darwinian bourgeois experience of time – a linear, relentless progress'). Clifford questions 'the assumption that with rapid change something essential ("culture"), a coherent differential identity, vanishes' (1986b: 113). He follows Raymond Williams' *The Country and the City* in locating this structure within the western tradition of the 'pastoral': 'a relentless placement of others in a present-becoming-past' (Clifford, 1986b: 115). As he shows, this benevolent ethnographic desire for an authentic other is a hegemonic desire. By the same token, the native's adoption of European culture is regarded as contamination or disappearance of authentic culture. When approached in terms of translation, however, such an adoption can also be seen as survival, that is, an adaptation.²⁶ Ethnography as salvage paradigm appears to be a resistance to the native's translation of the other's culture. But does Clifford's notion of imperfect translation not share the same assumption of a 'coherent, differential identity' of language which he identifies in the salvage paradigm? One of the senses of salvage is retrieval.

This salvaging or retrieval is the core methodological problem of postmodern ethnography as formulated by Tyler: 'achieving by written means what speech creates, and to do it without simply imitating speech' (1984: 25). If the idea of creating the effect of speech in writing were not indeed imitating speech in writing, Tyler would not have said

that it should be done 'without *simply* imitating speech'. Since the distinction between 'creating the effect of speech' and 'simply imitating speech' seems to hide a denial, we need to ask: is imitation simple? For Derrida, who seems to be the source of inspiration for such complex desires and formulations, imitation is by definition non-simple: 'imitation does not correspond to its essence, is not what it is – imitation – unless it is in some way at fault or rather in default' (Derrida, 1981a: 139). Tyler's and Clifford's desire to create an effect of speech in writing by 'following' Derrida implies a concept of self-present speech which is precisely what Derrida's deconstruction deconstructs.

A LESSON OF WRITING?

It is not simply that postmodern ethnography maintains the same anthropological presupposition in another form, but it is only deconstruction (supposedly a moment or variety of the so-called 'postmodernism') which can demonstrate that this is so. Postmodern ethnography wishes to represent a self-present voice, the native other's living speech, in writing, whereas deconstruction points to a singular moment or event which undoes representation and ex-appropriates the knowing, speaking or writing subject. We are surely reminded of the question of whether the 'post' of postmodernism is an instance of commodity logic, or in cultural register, modernity's new. If there is not much difference between the commodity logic and modernity's new, this does not mean that resistance is impossible. Although no academic text can be exempt from commodification today, precisely for this reason, the question of how one can resist the consumptive mode is of strategic significance. Rather than delivering a 'new' method, deconstruction insists on the generalization of loss and the absolutization of past that cannot simply be brought back in an authentic, native speech and that should therefore always be *remarked* in speech and writing.²⁷ The 'post' or 'beyond' of postmodernism is precisely the promise or assurance that a limit is finally overcome and whatever is left behind is no longer (that is, the old anthropology where the native is not one of the signatories of the text and writing is reduced to keeping good field notes). The sense of accomplishment here might indeed give in to the consumptive mode. Such a radically non-deconstructive stance is a salvaging of the limit and its appropriation as the universal certainty of partial knowledge. Against this incorporation and swallowing of the limit in and as the speech of the other, I suggest, following deconstruction, that the ethnographic representation, the graphing or writing the ethnos should not fail to *remark* the limit.²⁸ This is not a merely external limit that one can cross over in the model of the displaced migrant, but the limit of knowledge we have encountered in Blanchot's uncanny formulation. The experience of this limit is rather the experience (or passing) of a non-passage, or the experience of an absence or loss rather than simply of presence. It is only by remarking this undecidable and moving limit that the ethnographic text can open itself up to an otherness beyond its account and can thus keep the promise as promise. But, following Blanchot carefully, this remarking is not a mere acknowledgement of ignorance that can be the object of a new reflection or reflexivity. It is not, in other words, the question of a new epistemology, more poetic and less scientific, more native and less western. Such a new epistemology would claim to transcend the ethnographic by preserving it. As I have argued earlier this is an incorporation of the limit. The remarking is not a dialectical surmounting or Hegelian *aufheben* but writing the ethnos *otherwise*.

How to write 'otherwise'? There can be no easy answer. And more importantly, what follows this question cannot be in the order of an answer. What must be kept in mind is that the limit, the margin or the mark which the remark remarks is also the one which distinguishes the 'West' from the 'rest'. Following Spivak's formulation (the encrypting of the name of the native informant as the name of Man), we might say that it is *structurally* the 'rest' (for instance the 'Orient' in orientalism) that is *marked* in western discourse (as the 'Other', as object of knowledge or subject of speech in demand). Such an inscription or marking confirms the law of *spacing*, which Derrida describes as 'a movement, a displacement that indicates an irreducible alterity' (1981b: 81). It is at this very limit of ethnographic knowledge, at the margin of writing the ethnos, where no reflexivity and no return to self is possible, at the moment of ex-appropriation, that the ethnographic writing is given a chance of altering itself, and it is there that the remark remarks incommensurable and irreducible alterity.

Since this kind of practice of remarking can only occur in a strategic field, it can offer no model to be followed. Without forgetting the most important lesson of deconstruction, that the field of writing is a *strategic* force field, I should nevertheless give a unique 'example': Smadar Lavie's ethnography of a Bedouin community under Israeli and Egyptian rule, *The Poetics of Military Occupation*. Lavie's work focuses on the production of a resistant identity in theatrical performance and allegory rather than celebrating a plurality of voices. Towards the end of her narrative, one of her native informants describes Lavie herself as 'the one who writes us' (Lavie, 1990: 304). In accepting this as a cultural description of herself and making it the title of her last chapter, Lavie has acknowledged the problematic nature of ethnographic writing as an allegory of allegory. This is a way of remarking the limit, of writing the ethnos otherwise, and giving further strength to a resistance that is not content with depending on the certainty or transparency of its representative authority. It is also a singular and limited remarking which is focused on the ethnographer's drama. Lavie's narrative maintains the anthropological dream of an intimate mutuality between the anthropologist and the native in the form of a paradox of self and other, that is to say the non-synchronous nature of the mutual exchange of these positions, the impossibility of the 'at the same time' (Lavie, 1990: 304–8). Perhaps it should be supplemented by a question: While it is the native informant's description of the anthropologist which makes her (and us) aware of the paradoxical nature of mutuality in the non-synchrony of self and other, *the moment we have read this description* ('the one who writes us') and have understood and have interpreted it (anthropologist as both inside and outside, both self and other but never both at the same time), have we not *already forgotten* that it is said in a different language, in a singular accent of the Bedouin Arabic which performs and mimics itself as resistant allegory rather than native information?

THE POSTMODERN AS A FORECLOSURE OF THE NATIVE INFORMANT

The postmodern ethnographic project itself may turn out to be an allegory of Anglo-American academic culture. Derrida's deconstruction of metaphysics, Deleuze's project of a philosophy of event as what comes before the subject, Foucault's genealogical critique of human sciences are all radical critiques of the humanist subject or *cogito*, despite their absolutely significant differences. The case of ethnography shows that a

privileged moment of the Anglo-American 'postmodern' translation of these genealogies and deconstructions is to insert them back into the epistemological field of a *knowing subject*, through a certain notion of limit which is, as I have argued here, external, simple and stable, a boundary that one can simply cross over. New ethnography as 'writing culture' plays a special role in the translation of deconstruction of metaphysics into *cultural constructionism*, which takes the risk of reconstructing rather than deconstructing the West's cultural other(ing). This is surely not a question of blaming the theoretical backwardness of anthropologists (compared with literary critics, for instance) so much as examining how the production of an academic and cultural object such as postmodernism is necessarily marked by a reworking of ethnography's conventional displacement of humanism, of the 'Western Subject/Man'. I do not mean that postmodern ethnography is not authentic postmodernism but an American misreading, an 'imperfect' translation. Nor is it merely a subspecies of a general postmodernism. On the contrary I would like to argue that this general and totalizing notion of the *postmodern itself* is a translation in which the *ethnographic* postmodern plays a particular role as the site where a certain political unconscious becomes readable.²⁹ Where to find this singular political unconscious but in Fredric Jameson's grand historical account, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*? The sheer absence of any discussion of such an ethically and politically loaded methodological argument as postmodern ethnography in Jameson's fascinating theoretical appropriation of the postmodern is symptomatic. Depending on the passage from the modern to the postmodern, a change the direction of which is already given, Jameson's narrativization could only have been a self-contained history of the modern capitalist West.³⁰ Having been produced in the same force field where Jameson collects his own articulating terms such as 'the death of the author' or 'intertextuality' (Jameson, 1991: 1–54), does the postmodern ethnographic text not constitute a kind of *political unconscious* for his work? The ethnographic postmodern is a significant site of what I would describe as a *prior translative inscription* of the so-called postmodern language and vocabulary (a genealogical layer of concepts, terms, phrases and so on, which constitute the postmodern as the translation of a radical moment in post-war French philosophy). Indeed, literary criticism and art history seemingly play a more important role in this genealogical inscription. But perhaps ethnography's role is more difficult to articulate since, in its encrypting of the name of the native informant as the name of Man, it ineluctably brings up a certain *untranslatability* into play, like a trace disclosing itself in its erasure. If Jameson's historical account cannot come to terms with this prior translative inscription of, precisely, terms such as 'the death of the author' and 'intertextuality' but rather registers and theorizes it as cognitive mapping, this is not only because it acts on a level of generality that is produced by it but also because, in the *suppressed* case of ethnography, this inscription threatens to open Jameson's narrative to an *otherness* which may disturb the self-contained nature of his postmodern object. Is it not the (un)naming of the native informant that is at stake in all these discourses on 'postmodernism'?

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Notes

- 1 Although the former view is not specific to Jean-François Lyotard and is shared by many in the US academia, one must nonetheless underline that it is generally used in the wake of his influential work, *The Postmodern Condition* (1984). Fredric Jameson's work on postmodernism can be regarded as an example of the latter view in the same general terms.
- 2 A similar discussion is found in Kirby (1993).
- 3 See especially Johannes Fabian (1990, 1991b, 1996, 1998); Fischer and Abedi (1990); Fischer (2004); Rosaldo (2003). Lila Abu-Lughod's ethnographies of Bedouin culture and women (1986, 1993) can also be regarded as part of the same general movement to the extent that they engage a similar notion of narrative. Abu-Lughod's project, however, is 'writing *against* culture' as she is critical of the fetishistic abstraction which characterizes the conventional concept of culture. The culture concept makes cultural difference seem evident and is a tool for making people other (Abu-Lughod, 1993: 6–13). Her sensitivity to especially women's individual narratives opens up new avenues for ethnographic research. But since the anthropological relationship is not ethical singularity, the anthropologist has to acknowledge the impossibility of her task and should interrupt her text rather than making this acknowledgement a part of it.
- 4 I should also note the fact that ethnography itself is one of the methods employed in the early founding work of cultural studies at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (the working class and/or audience ethnographies of Paul Willis and Dave Morley). Understandably this has led to growing interaction and mutual penetration between anthropology and cultural studies in the later development of these fields, especially in the United States. James Clifford has been one of the pioneers of a productive exchange between the two fields. George Marcus' more recent work (1998) is an example of this tendency of an ethnographic cultural studies.
- 5 In retrospect, Clifford makes a nice discussion of his emphasis on 'the tropological pre-encoding on the "real"' in his recent book of interviews (Clifford, 2003: 13–14).
- 6 Among the other significant theoretical contributions, one must cite Johannes Fabian's *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (1983) as well as George E. Marcus and Michael Fischer's *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* (1986) and Renato Rosaldo's *Culture and Truth* (1993). Marcus and Fischer's work is closer to the tradition of non-positivist, interpretive anthropology. Although it carries Geertz's argument further by describing the ethnographic aspiration as 'eliciting the native's point of view' and the 'current problem' as requiring 'new narrative motifs' (Marcus and Fischer, 1986: 27, 26), it does not go as far as Clifford in emphasizing the poetic aspect or the native's voice as a singular voice in ethnographic narrative. Fabian's work is original in its inventive and rich formulas such as 'pushing the other back in time' or 'denial of coevalness' (see especially the first three chapters), but its

specific argument requires a separate reading for this reason. All of these works, however, share the general theoretical tendency that I have outlined in this article: a dialogical concern with difference and otherness in terms of speech rather than a merely scientific description of culture. There is a branch of feminist ethnography which is in critical dialogue with and can be regarded as part of postmodern ethnography. As it would require a more particular argument, it remains outside my concern in this article. I should nevertheless underline that to the extent that it repeats the same conceptual gesture as Clifford's, the foregoing criticism should be applicable for it as well. Ruth Behar and Deborah A. Gordon's important collection *Women Writing Culture* (1996) brings valuable criticisms, especially in autonomizing women's voice and writing, but it does not go beyond what Clifford expects from the new ethnographer and remains within the postmodern ethnographic inclusion. A singularly important contribution is Kamela Visweswaran's *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography* (1994). Her particular problematization of the boundaries of fiction and science, or literature and ethnography, as well as her employment of a deconstructive strategy of deferral as ethnographic instrument would require a particular reading. For Lila Abu-Lughod's feminist ethnographies of Bedouin women, see note 3.

- 7 Clifford has described himself in similar terms in the same interview: 'I'm more marginal to the field. I frequent the borders. And that's my basic methodological principle, if one could call it that: never accept, never take as a beginning or ending point, what the discipline says it is. Ask instead: What do anthropologists, for all their disagreements, say they are *not*? Then focus on the historical *relationship* that is being policed, or negotiated – the process of disciplining that goes on at the edge' (2003: 8). I certainly follow him in asking what scholars and researchers say they are *not*, and in focusing on the historical *relationship* (which I describe as his renegotiating the ethnographic contract). But instead of 'disciplining that goes on at the edge', I would refer to the *problem* that keeps returning at the edge.
- 8 I cannot help underlining a similarity here between the earliest avant-garde movement of modernity, that is, German romanticism, and one of the latest, post-modern ethnography: both depend heavily on a notion of *incompleteness* in different ways. In their fascinating work on German Romanticism, Phillippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy have observed a similar deconstruction of romantic incompleteness in Blanchot's reading of the romantic journal *Atheneum*:

Within romantic work, there is interruption and dissemination of the romantic work, and this in fact is not readable in the work itself, even and especially not, when the fragment, *Witz*, and chaos are privileged. Rather, according to another term of Blanchot, it is readable in the unworking [*desoeuvrement*], never named, and still less thought, that insinuates itself through the interstices of the romantic work. *Unworking is not incompleteness, for as we have seen incompleteness completes itself and is the fragment as such; unworking is nothing, only the interruption of the fragment.* (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, 1988: 57, my emphasis)

See also, Maurice Blanchot's essay on 'The Atheneum' in *The Infinite Conversation* (1993: 351–9). The question of continuities and discontinuities between

romanticism and postmodern ethnography might be a subject for further research, and it is surely part of the general question of romanticism's huge, complex and ambivalent legacy today.

- 9 It is *not* her child yet, her girl, another self, *but* 'a big thing', non-self. This immediate aftermath of the birth is a singular moment, which is before a mother is able to say 'My child . . . today my child is no longer nursing' (Shostak, 1983: 198). I must also add that a similar expression appears at another dramatic moment. When her husband realizes that Nisa is pregnant (from another man probably), she describes his look in the same manner: 'He looked at me, looked and looked and looked' (Shostak, 1983: 191). The expression is employed at dramatic moments *when a certain crisis or limit appears*. In marking this, the ethnographer is not eliciting or bringing out a native voice present to itself but marking the non-self-presence of the voice.
- 10 Although poetic and scientific dimensions can also be considered in terms of 'style' rather than 'voice', given the ethical value of the native voice in the new ethnographic text, I would like to suggest that part of the problem is precisely the consideration of the question of style *in terms of voice*. In other words, the concept of voice is essential to the postmodern ethnographic enterprise precisely because it requires the concept of self-presence which the concept of style cannot communicate directly because of its dependence on 'writerly' concerns. In its opposition to the positivistic recording of observation which depends on a simple opposition between the literal and the allegorical, the new ethnographer has too quickly conquered the field of writing (forgetting that it is a force field). Since its ethical critique of representation does not involve the deconstruction of the *subject form* itself, the question of style can hardly be articulated within its limits.
- 11 For a brilliant critique of Tyler's work, especially his claim of following a Derridean approach, see Kirby (1989).
- 12 Leroi-Gourhan writes: 'in its origins figurative art was directly linked with language and was much closer to writing (in the broadest sense) than to what we understand by a work of art' (1993, 190). Leroi-Gourhan's broad concept of writing was carefully read by Derrida himself in his *Of Grammatology* (Derrida, 1976: 81–7).
- 13 I thank Trevor Hope for his help with this formulation.
- 14 The comparison of voice with photography in this passage is important. The living and natural character of voice is preferred over photography's attachment to an irreducible past. Does photography not become a metaphor for an absolute past that cannot be brought back in living speech?
- 15 I am reminded of Gayatri Spivak's careful criticism of 'uncritical inclusiveness': if native voice is strategically excluded by conventional anthropology according to postmodernist ethnographers, it might have been more advisable to keep in mind that 'any critique of strategic exclusions should bring analytical presuppositions into crisis' (Spivak, 1988: 249) rather than trying to correct the anthropological record.
- 16 I thank Johannes Fabian for drawing my attention to this point.
- 17 For the notion of ex-appropriation, see Derrida and Nancy (1991: 105–7).
- 18 For a brilliant exposition of Derrida's concept of experience, see Direk (2000).
- 19 The anthropologist would like to argue that he or she does not employ an interrogative abstract syntax in his or her interaction with the native. My point is precisely

- that this moment is bound to arise in anthropological encounter. If ethnography is research, then it might be more advisable to describe its method as controlled intimacy than participant observation.
- 20 I thank Vicki Kirby for drawing my attention to Blanchot's uncanny formulation as well as the following quotation from Pierre Bourdieu. I am in debt to her reading of Blanchot in her *Telling Flesh* (1997: 87–8, 156–7) and my following approach to 'absolute past' is inspired by her argument to some extent. See especially Kirby (1989: 40).
 - 21 In his work on Bergson, Gilles Deleuze has demonstrated the relevance of the concept of 'absolute past' for memory and recollection: 'There is therefore a "past in general" that is not the particular past of a particular present but that is like an ontological element, a past that is eternal and for all time, the condition of passage of every particular present. It is the past in general that makes possible all pasts' (Deleuze, 1991: 56–7). The notion of an ontological element or condition here is not unproblematical. How could absolute past be absolute, if it did not mean, paradoxically, a radical de-ontologization of past? Deleuze here can only be followed in a sense closer to Derrida's notion of '*différance*' as 'a past that has never been present, and which never will be, whose future to come will never be a production or reproduction in the form of a presence' (Derrida, 1982: 21–2).
 - 22 In this context, see especially Jacques Derrida's early work on Husserlian phenomenology (1973). Bourdieu makes a radical use of the Husserlian difference between the temporality of retention and protension and the temporality of project. Hence his emphasis on a certain notion of 'forthcoming reality' or 'imminent' or 'upcoming future (*un a venir*)' for creating a dynamic, fluctuating sense of social strategy employed by agents. Although Bourdieu's phenomenological attention to everyday temporality gives his framework a sense of flexibility and dynamism, metaphysics of presence survives the concept of habitus in his sociological adoption of metaphysical certainties. Indeed the Durkheimian reference should put a significant part of his theoretical claim in crisis, especially his ideas on the generative, inventive power of habitus. Bourdieu's materialism, his insistence on the role of bodily mimesis and his great thesis that social practice is not simply the following of an abstract rule or model, but always inscribed and embodied, aims to fight metaphysics in the concept of habitus. But in opposing the abstract to the habitus (as if the former is never part of the latter), and in simply reverting the problematic of mimesis, this sociologistic materialism reduces the philosophical problematic into a mere question of correct methodology and results in a dismissal of what might be called the transcendental or the virtual. For instance, Gilles Deleuze's work has shown that the virtual is never fully actualized in history, but always part of it. In terms of Deleuze's work, Bourdieu's framework remains limited with the first passive synthesis of time – retention and protension (Deleuze, 1994: 70–85).
 - 23 I should remind the reader here that in this supplementary economy of repetition (reconstruction, remaking), *re*-appropriation (information *retrieval*) is determined as *ex*-appropriation by absolute past or *différance*.
 - 24 Gayatri Spivak's work has persistently drawn our attention to what might be described as the inscription of sympathy in her deconstruction of humanist benevolence. In *The Postcolonial Critic*, she emphasizes that the benevolent subject's desire

- to do good and to promote the happiness of others involves 'welcoming those others into his own understanding of the world, so that they too can be liberated and begin to inhabit a world that is the best of all possible worlds' (Spivak, 1990: 19). In the performance of such good intention, the norm remains the benevolent humanist. Being benevolent or sympathetic towards 'others' is thus a reduction of their difference and an inscription of sameness.
- 25 For an astute critical reading of Clifford's (and Homi Bhabha's) problematic of displacement, see Cheah (1998). Clifford responds to this criticism in the same collection (1998).
 - 26 This is an important point which has implications for the so-called process of globalization. In a recent interview, Clifford reiterates the same point in a criticism of a certain kind of criticism of globalization, of the idea that the spread of American hegemonic culture results in a wholesale destruction of local cultures and a world-wide homogenization of culture (Clifford, 2003: 33).
 - 27 For the notion of *remark* that I employ here, see Derrida's *Dissemination* (1981a: 258).
 - 28 Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok (1986, 1987) argue that it is the incorporation which leads to the formation of a *crypt* inside the subject. This incorporation is, in their framework, a swallowing of words as opposed to their introjection, that is, the subject's articulation of his or her desire in words. It is in a rethinking of this analysis that Gayatri Spivak has produced the formulation, mentioned earlier, of 'the encrypting of the name of the native informant as the name of Man' (1999: 5).
 - 29 In a more comprehensive historical account, this should be taken back to the early ethnographic work at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham, especially the working-class ethnographies of Paul Willis and Dave Morley. It is important to emphasize, however, that these works are stamped by a distinctively Marxist concern, like the whole work at the Birmingham Centre. This point must surely complicate my argument given earlier.
 - 30 Indeed the same argument is also applicable for Lyotard's *Postmodern Condition*, in which the native is taken as the originating model of story-teller, that is, as an allegory of 'language-game' which is the strategic concept in articulating the change in the status of knowledge in western society.

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