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THE PREDICAMENT OF CULTURE ✱

*Twentieth-Century Ethnography,
Literature, and Art*

HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England

1988

We were once the masters of the earth, but since the gringos arrived we have become veritable pariahs . . . We hope that the day will come when they realize that we are their roots and that we must grow together like a giant tree with its branches and flowers.

—FRANCISCO SERVIN, PAJ-TAVYTERA, AT
THE CONGRESS OF INDIANS, PARAGUAY, 1974

Introduction: The Pure Products Go Crazy

SOMETIME AROUND 1920 in a New Jersey suburb of New York City, a young doctor wrote a poem about a girl he called Elsie. He saw her working in his kitchen or laundry room, helping his wife with the house cleaning or the kids. Something about her brought him up short. She seemed to sum up where everything was going—his family, his fledgling practice, his art, the modern world that surrounded and caught them all in its careening movement.

The poem William Carlos Williams wrote was a rush of associations, beginning with a famous assertion:

The pure products of America
go crazy—

and continuing almost without stopping for breath . . .

mountain folk from Kentucky

or the ribbed north end of

Jersey

with its isolate lakes and

valleys, its deaf-mutes, thieves
 old names
 and promiscuity between
 devil-may-care men who have taken
 to railroading
 out of sheer lust for adventure—
 and young slatterns, bathed
 in filth
 from Monday to Saturday
 to be tricked out that night
 with gauds
 from imaginations which have no
 peasant traditions to give them
 character
 but flutter and flaunt
 sheer rags—succumbing without
 emotion
 save numbed terror
 under some hedge of choke-cherry
 or viburnum—
 which they cannot express—
 Unless it be that marriage
 perhaps
 with a dash of Indian blood
 will throw up a girl so desolate
 so hemmed round
 with disease or murder
 that she'll be rescued by an
 agent—
 reared by the state and
 sent out at fifteen to work in
 some hard pressed
 house in the suburbs—

some doctor's family, some Elsie—
 voluptuous water
 expressing with broken
 brain the truth about us—
 her great
 ungainly hips and flopping breasts
 addressed to cheap
 jewelry
 and rich young men with fine eyes
 when suddenly the angry description veers:
 as if the earth under our feet
 were
 an excrement of some sky
 and we degraded prisoners
 destined
 to hunger until we eat filth
 while the imagination strains
 after deer
 going by fields of goldenrod in
 the stifling heat of September
 Somehow
 it seems to destroy us
 It is only in isolate flecks that
 something
 is given off
 No one
 to witness
 and adjust, no one to drive the car

These lines emerged en route in Williams' dada treatise on the imagination, *Spring & All* (1923). I hope they can serve as a pretext for this book, a way of starting in with a predicament. Call the predicament ethnographic modernity: ethnographic because Williams finds himself off center among scattered traditions; modernity since the condition of rootlessness and mobility he confronts is an increasingly common fate. "El-

sie" stands simultaneously for a local cultural breakdown and a collective future. To Williams her story is inescapably his, everyone's. Looking at the "great/ungainly hips and flopping breasts" he feels things falling apart, everywhere. All the beautiful, primitive places are ruined. A kind of cultural incest, a sense of runaway history pervades, drives the rush of associations.

This feeling of lost authenticity, of "modernity" ruining some essence or source, is not a new one. In *The Country and the City* (1973) Raymond Williams finds it to be a repetitive, pastoral "structure of feeling." Again and again over the millennia change is configured as disorder, pure products go crazy. But the image of Elsie suggests a new turn. By the 1920s a truly global space of cultural connections and dissolutions has become imaginable: local authenticities meet and merge in transient urban and suburban settings—settings that will include the immigrant neighborhoods of New Jersey, multicultural sprawls like Buenos Aires, the townships of Johannesburg. While William Carlos Williams invokes the pure products of America, the "we" careening in his driverless car is clearly something more. The ethnographic modernist searches for the universal in the local, the whole in the part. Williams' famous choice of an American (rather than English) speech, his regionally based poetic and medical practice must not cut him off from the most general human processes. His cosmopolitanism requires a perpetual veering between local attachments and general possibilities.

Elsie disrupts the project, for her very existence raises *historical* uncertainties undermining the modernist doctor-poet's secure position.¹ His response to the disorder she represents is complex and ambivalent. If authentic traditions, the pure products, are everywhere yielding to promiscuity and aimlessness, the option of nostalgia holds no charm. There is no going back, no essence to redeem. Here, and throughout his writing, Williams avoids pastoral, folkloristic appeals of the sort common among other liberals in the twenties—exhorting, preserving, collecting a true rural culture in endangered places like Appalachia. Such authenticities would be at best artificial aesthetic purifications (Whisnant 1983). Nor does Williams settle for two other common ways of confronting the rush

1. "Elsie" also displaces a literary tradition. In Western writing servants have always performed the chore of representing "the people"—lower classes and different races. Domesticated outsiders of the bourgeois imagination, they regularly provide fictional epiphanies, recognition scenes, happy endings, utopic and distopic transcendences. A brilliant survey is provided by Bruce Robbins 1986.

of history. He does not evoke Elsie and the idiocy of rural life to celebrate a progressive, technological future. He shares her fate, for there really is "no one to drive the car"—a frightening condition. Nor does Williams resign himself sadly to the loss of local traditions in an entropic modernity—a vision common among prophets of cultural homogenization, lamenters of the ruined tropics. Instead, he claims that "something" is still being "given off"—if only in "isolate flecks."

It is worth dwelling on the discrepancy between this emergent, dispersed "something" and the car in which "we" all ride. Is it possible to resist the poem's momentum, its rushed inevitability? To do so is not so much to offer an adequate reading (of a poetic sequence abstracted from *Spring & All*) as it is to reflect on several readings, on several historical "Elsies." Let this problematic figure with her "dash of Indian blood," her ungainly female form, her inarticulateness stand for groups marginalized or silenced in the bourgeois West: "natives," women, the poor. There is violence, curiosity, pity, and desire in the poet's gaze. Elsie provokes very mixed emotions. Once again a female, possibly colored body serves as a site of attraction, repulsion, symbolic appropriation. Elsie lives only for the eyes of privileged men. An inarticulate muddle of lost origins, she is going nowhere. Williams evokes this with his angry, bleak sympathy—and then turns it all into modern history. Two-thirds of the way through the poem, Elsie's personal story shifts toward the general; her own path through the suburban kitchen vanishes. She, Williams, all of us are caught in modernity's inescapable momentum.

Something similar occurs whenever marginal peoples come into a historical or ethnographic space that has been defined by the Western imagination. "Entering the modern world," their distinct histories quickly vanish. Swept up in a destiny dominated by the capitalist West and by various technologically advanced socialisms, these suddenly "backward" peoples no longer invent local futures. What is different about them remains tied to traditional pasts, inherited structures that either resist or yield to the new but cannot produce it.

This book proposes a different historical vision. It does not see the world as populated by endangered authenticities—pure products always going crazy. Rather, it makes space for specific paths through modernity, a recognition anticipated by Williams' discrepant question: what is "given off" by individual histories like Elsie's? Are the "isolate flecks" dying sparks? New beginnings? Or . . . ? "Compose. (No ideas/but in things) Invent!" This was Williams' slogan (1967:7). In *Spring & All* the

human future is something to be creatively imagined, not simply endured: "new form dealt with as reality itself . . . To enter a new world, and have there freedom of movement and newness" (1923:70, 71). But geopolitical questions must now be asked of every inventive poetics of reality, including that urged by this book: Whose reality? Whose new world? Where exactly does anyone stand to write "as if the earth under our feet/were an excrement of some sky/and we . . . destined . . .?"

People and things are increasingly out of place. A doctor-poet-fieldworker, Williams watches and listens to New Jersey's immigrants, workers, women giving birth, pimply-faced teenagers, mental cases. In their lives and words, encountered through a privileged participant observation both poetic and scientific, he finds material for his writing. Williams moves freely out into the homes of his patients, keeping a medical-aesthetic distance (though sometimes with great difficulty, as in the "beautiful thing" sequences of *Paterson*, book 3). The meeting with Elsie is somehow different: a troubling outsider turns up *inside* bourgeois domestic space. She cannot be held at a distance.

This invasion by an ambiguous person of questionable origin anticipates developments that would become widely apparent only after the Second World War. Colonial relations would be pervasively contested. After 1950 peoples long spoken for by Western ethnographers, administrators, and missionaries began to speak and act more powerfully for themselves on a global stage. It was increasingly difficult to keep them in their (traditional) places. Distinct ways of life once destined to merge into "the modern world" reasserted their difference, in novel ways. We perceive Elsie differently in light of these developments.

Reading against the poem's momentum, from new positions, we are able to wonder: What becomes of this girl after her stint in William Carlos Williams' kitchen? Must she symbolize a dead end? What does Elsie prefigure? As woman: her ungainly body is either a symbol of failure in a world dominated by the male gaze or the image of a powerful, "disorderly" female form, an alternative to sexist definitions of beauty. As impure product: this mix of backgrounds is either an uprooted lost soul or a new hybrid person, less domestic than the suburban family home she passes through. As American Indian: Elsie is either the last all-but-assimilated remnant of the Tuscaroras who, according to tradition, settled in the Ramapough hills of Northern New Jersey, or she represents a Native American past that is being turned into an unexpected future. (During the last decade a group of Elsie's kin calling themselves the Ramapough Tribe have actively asserted an Indian identity.)² Williams'

assimilation of his symbolic servant to a shared destiny seems less definitive now.

"Elsie," read in the late twentieth century, is both more specific and less determined. Her possible futures reflect an unresolved set of challenges to Western visions of modernity—challenges that resonate throughout this book. Elsie is still largely silent here, but her disturbing presences—a plurality of emergent subjects—can be felt.³ The time is past when privileged authorities could routinely "give voice" (or history) to others without fear of contradiction. "Croce's great dictum that all history is contemporary history does not mean that all history is our contemporary history . . ." (Jameson 1981:18) When the prevailing narratives of Western identity are contested, the political issue of history as emergence becomes inescapable. Juliet Mitchell writes in *Women: The Longest Revolution* (1984): "I do not think that we can live as human subjects without in some sense taking on a history; for us, it is mainly the history of being men or women under bourgeois capitalism. In deconstructing that history, we can only construct other histories. What are we in the process of becoming?" (p. 294). We are not all together in Williams' car.



Only one of Elsie's emergent possibilities, the one connected with her "dash of Indian blood," is explored in this book. During the fall of 1977 in Boston Federal Court the descendants of Wampanoag Indians living in Mashpee, "Cape Cod's Indian Town," were required to prove their identity. To establish a legal right to sue for lost lands these citizens of modern Massachusetts were asked to demonstrate continuous tribal existence since the seventeenth century. Life in Mashpee had changed dramati-

2. The Native American ancestry of the isolated and inbred Ramapough mountain people ("old names" . . . from "the ribbed north end of/Jersey") is debatable. Some, like the folklorist David Cohen (1974), deny it altogether, debunking the story of a Tuscarora offshoot. Others believe that this mixed population (formerly called Jackson's Whites, and drawing on black, Dutch, and English roots) probably owes more to Delaware than to Tuscarora Indian blood. Whatever its real historical roots, the tribe as presently constituted is a living impure product.

3. "Natives," women, the poor: this book discusses the ethnographic construction of only the first group. In the dominant ideological systems of the bourgeois West they are interrelated, and a more systematic treatment than mine would bring this out. For some beginnings see Duvignaud 1973; Alloula 1981; Trinh 1987; and Spivak 1987.

cally, however, since the first contacts between English Pilgrims at Plymouth and the Massachusetts-speaking peoples of the region. Were the plaintiffs of 1977 the "same" Indians? Were they something more than a collection of individuals with varying degrees of Native American ancestry? If they were different from their neighbors, how was their "tribal" difference manifested? During a long, well-publicized trial scores of Indians and whites testified about life in Mashpee. Professional historians, anthropologists, and sociologists took the stand as expert witnesses. The bitter story of New England Indians was told in minute detail and vehemently debated. In the conflict of interpretations, concepts such as "tribe," "culture," "identity," "assimilation," "ethnicity," "politics," and "community" were themselves on trial. I sat through most of the forty days of argument, listening and taking notes.

It seemed to me that the trial—beyond its immediate political stakes—was a crucial experiment in cross-cultural translation. Modern Indians, who spoke in New England–accented English about the Great Spirit, had to convince a white Boston jury of their authenticity. The translation process was fraught with ambiguities, for all the cultural boundaries at issue seemed to be blurred and shifting. The trial raised far-reaching questions about modes of cultural interpretation, implicit models of wholeness, styles of distancing, stories of historical development.

I began to see such questions as symptoms of a pervasive postcolonial crisis of ethnographic authority. While the crisis has been felt most strongly by formerly hegemonic Western discourses, the questions it raises are of global significance. Who has the authority to speak for a group's identity or authenticity? What are the essential elements and boundaries of a culture? How do self and other clash and converse in the encounters of ethnography, travel, modern interethnic relations? What narratives of development, loss, and innovation can account for the present range of local oppositional movements? During the trial these questions assumed a more than theoretical urgency.

My perspective in the courtroom was an oblique one. I had just finished a Ph.D. thesis in history with a strong interest in the history of the human sciences, particularly cultural anthropology. At the time of the trial I was rewriting my dissertation for publication. The thesis was a biography of Maurice Leenhardt, a missionary and ethnographer in French New Caledonia and an ethnologist in Paris (Clifford 1982a). What could be farther from New England Indians? The connections turned out to be close and provocative.

In Melanesia Leenhardt was deeply involved with tribal groups who had experienced a colonial assault as extreme as that inflicted in Massachusetts. He was preoccupied with practical and theoretical problems of cultural change, syncretism, conversion, and survival. Like many American Indians the militarily defeated Kanaks of New Caledonia had "tribal" institutions forced on them as a restrictive reservation system. Both groups would make strategic accommodations with these external forms of government. Native Americans and Melanesians would survive periods of acute demographic and cultural crisis, as well as periods of change and revival. Over the last hundred years New Caledonia's Kanaks have managed to find powerful, distinctive ways to live as Melanesians in an invasive world. It seemed to me that the Mashpee were struggling toward a similar goal, reviving and inventing ways to live as Indians in the twentieth century.

Undoubtedly what I heard in the New England courtroom influenced my sense of Melanesian identity, something I came to understand not as an archaic survival but as an ongoing process, politically contested and historically unfinished. In my studies of European ethnographic institutions I have cultivated a similar attitude.



This book is concerned with Western visions and practices. They are shown, however, responding to forces that challenge the authority and even the future identity of "the West." Modern ethnography appears in several forms, traditional and innovative. As an academic practice it cannot be separated from anthropology. Seen more generally, it is simply diverse ways of thinking and writing about culture from a standpoint of participant observation. In this expanded sense a poet like Williams is an ethnographer. So are many of the people social scientists have called "native informants." Ultimately my topic is a pervasive condition of off-centeredness in a world of distinct meaning systems, a state of being in culture while looking at culture, a form of personal and collective self-fashioning. This predicament—not limited to scholars, writers, artists, or intellectuals—responds to the twentieth century's unprecedented overlay of traditions. A modern "ethnography" of conjunctures, constantly moving between cultures, does not, like its Western alter ego "anthropology," aspire to survey the full range of human diversity or development. It is perpetually displaced, both regionally focused and broadly comparative, a form both of dwelling and of travel in a world where the two experiences are less and less distinct.

This book migrates between local and global perspectives, constantly recontextualizing its topic. Part One focuses on strategies of writing and representation, strategies that change historically in response to the general shift from high colonialism around 1900 to postcolonialism and neocolonialism after the 1950s. In these chapters I try to show that ethnographic texts are orchestrations of multivocal exchanges occurring in politically charged situations. The subjectivities produced in these often unequal exchanges—whether of “natives” or of visiting participant-observers—are constructed domains of truth, serious fictions. Once this is recognized, diverse inventive possibilities for postcolonial ethnographic representation emerge, some of which are surveyed in this book. Part Two portrays ethnography in alliance with avant-garde art and cultural criticism, activities with which it shares modernist procedures of collage, juxtaposition, and estrangement. The “exotic” is now nearby. In this section I also probe the limits of Western ethnography through several self-reflexive forms of travel writing, exploring the possibilities of a twentieth-century “poetics of displacement.” Part Three turns to the history of collecting, particularly the classification and display of “primitive” art and exotic “cultures.” My general aim is to displace any transcendent regime of authenticity, to argue that all authoritative collections, whether made in the name of art or science, are historically contingent and subject to local reappropriation. In the book’s final section I explore how non-Western historical experiences—those of “orientals” and “tribal” Native Americans—are hemmed in by concepts of continuous tradition and the unified self. I argue that identity, considered ethnographically, must always be mixed, relational, and inventive.

Self-identity emerges as a complex cultural problem in my treatment of two polyglot refugees, Joseph Conrad and Bronislaw Malinowski, Poles shipwrecked in England and English. Both men produced seminal meditations on the local fictions of collective life, and, with different degrees of irony, both constructed identities based on the acceptance of limited realities and forms of expression. Embracing the serious fiction of “culture,” they wrote at a moment when the ethnographic (relativist and plural) idea began to attain its modern currency. Here and elsewhere in the book I try to historicize and see beyond this currency, straining for a concept that can preserve culture’s differentiating functions while conceiving of collective identity as a hybrid, often discontinuous inventive process. Culture is a deeply compromised idea I cannot yet do without.

Some of the political dangers of culturalist reductions and essences

are explored in my analysis of Edward Said’s polemical work *Orientalism* (1978a). What emerges is the inherently discrepant stance of a postcolonial “oppositional” critic, for the construction of simplifying essences and distancing dichotomies is clearly not a monopoly of Western Orientalist experts. Said himself writes in ways that simultaneously assert and subvert his own authority. My analysis suggests that there can be no final smoothing over of the discrepancies in his discourse, since it is increasingly difficult to maintain a cultural and political position “outside” the Occident from which, in security, to attack it. Critiques like Said’s are caught in the double ethnographic movement I have been evoking. Locally based and politically engaged, they must resonate globally; while they engage pervasive postcolonial processes, they do so without over-view, from a blatantly partial perspective.

Intervening in an interconnected world, one is always, to varying degrees, “inauthentic”: caught between cultures, implicated in others. Because discourse in global power systems is elaborated vis-à-vis, a sense of difference or distinctness can never be located solely in the continuity of a culture or tradition. Identity is conjunctural, not essential. Said addresses these issues most affectingly in *After the Last Sky*, a recent evocation of “Palestinian Lives” and of his own position among them (1986a:150): “A part of something is for the foreseeable future going to be better than all of it. Fragments over wholes. Restless nomadic activity over the settlements of held territory. Criticism over resignation. The Palestinian as self-consciousness in a barren plain of investments and consumer appetites. The heroism of anger over the begging bowl, limited independence over the status of clients. Attention, alertness, focus. To do as others do, but somehow to stand apart. To tell your story in pieces, as it is.” This work appeared as I was finishing my own book. Thus my discussion of *Orientalism* merely anticipates Said’s ongoing search for nonessentialist forms of cultural politics. *After the Last Sky* actively inhabits the discrepancy between a specific condition of Palestinian exile and a more general twentieth-century range of options. It is (and is not only) as a Palestinian that Said movingly accepts “our wanderings,” pleading for “the open secular element, and not the symmetry of redemption” (p. 150).



I share this suspicion of “the symmetry of redemption.” Questionable acts of purification are involved in any attainment of a promised land, return

to "original" sources, or gathering up of a true tradition. Such claims to purity are in any event always subverted by the need to stage authenticity in opposition to external, often dominating alternatives. Thus the "Third World" plays itself against the "First World," and vice versa. At a local level, Trobriand Islanders invent their culture within and against the contexts of recent colonial history and the new nation of Papua-New Guinea. If authenticity is relational, there can be no essence except as a political, cultural invention, a local tactic.

In this book I question some of the local tactics of Western ethnography, focusing on redemptive modes of textualization and particularly of collecting. Several chapters analyze in some detail the systems of authenticity that have been imposed on creative works of non-Western art and culture. They look at collecting and authenticating practices in contemporary settings: for example the controversy surrounding an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City over the relations between "tribal" and "modern" art. How have exotic objects been given value as "art" and "culture" in Western collecting systems? I do not argue, as some critics have, that non-Western objects are properly understood only with reference to their original milieu. Ethnographic contextualizations are as problematic as aesthetic ones, as susceptible to purified, ahistorical treatment.

I trace the modern history of both aesthetic and ethnographic classifications in an earlier setting: avant-garde Paris of the 1920s and 1930s, a radical context I call ethnographic surrealism. Two influential museums, the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro and its scientific successor, the Musée de l'Homme, symbolize distinct modes of "art and culture collecting." Their juxtaposition forces the question: How are ethnographic worlds and their meaningful artifacts cut up, salvaged, and valued? Here culture appears not as a tradition to be saved but as assembled codes and artifacts always susceptible to critical and creative recombination. Ethnography is an explicit form of cultural critique sharing radical perspectives with dada and surrealism. Instead of acquiescing in the separation of avant-garde experiment from disciplinary science, I reopen the frontier, suggesting that the modern division of art and ethnography into distinct institutions has restricted the former's analytic power and the latter's subversive vocation.

Since 1900 inclusive collections of "Mankind" have become institutionalized in academic disciplines like anthropology and in museums of art or ethnology. A restrictive "art-culture system" has come to control

the authenticity, value, and circulation of artifacts and data. Analyzing this system, I propose that any collection implies a temporal vision generating rarity and worth, a metahistory. This history defines which groups or things will be redeemed from a disintegrating human past and which will be defined as the dynamic, or tragic, agents of a common destiny. My analysis works to bring out the local, political contingency of such histories and of the modern collections they justify. Space is cleared, perhaps, for alternatives.



This book is a spliced ethnographic object, an incomplete collection. It consists of explorations written and rewritten over a seven-year period. Its own historical moment has been marked by rapid changes in the terms—scientific, aesthetic, and textual—governing cross-cultural representation. Written from within a "West" whose authority to represent unified human history is now widely challenged and whose very spatial identity is increasingly problematic, the explorations gathered here cannot—should not—add up to a seamless vision. Their partiality is apparent. The chapters vary in form and style, reflecting diverse conjunctures and specific occasions of composition. I have not tried to rewrite those already published to produce a consistent veneer. Moreover, I have included texts that actively break up the book's prevailing tone, hoping in this way to manifest the rhetoric of my accounts. I prefer sharply focused pictures, composed in ways that show the frame or lens.

Ethnography, a hybrid activity, thus appears as writing, as collecting, as modernist collage, as imperial power, as subversive critique. Viewed most broadly, perhaps, my topic is a mode of travel, a way of understanding and getting around in a diverse world that, since the sixteenth century, has become cartographically unified. One of the principal functions of ethnography is "orientation" (a term left over from a time when Europe traveled and invented itself with respect to a fantastically unified "East"). But in the twentieth century ethnography reflects new "spatial practices" (De Certeau 1984), new forms of dwelling and circulating.

This century has seen a drastic expansion of mobility, including tourism, migrant labor, immigration, urban sprawl. More and more people "dwell" with the help of mass transit, automobiles, airplanes. In cities on six continents foreign populations have come to stay—mixing in but often in partial, specific fashions. The "exotic" is uncannily close. Conversely, there seem no distant places left on the planet where the pres-

ence of "modern" products, media, and power cannot be felt. An older topography and experience of travel is exploded. One no longer leaves home confident of finding something radically new, another time or space. Difference is encountered in the adjoining neighborhood, the familiar turns up at the ends of the earth. This dis-"orientation" is reflected throughout the book. For example twentieth-century academic ethnography does not appear as a practice of interpreting distinct, whole ways of life but instead as a series of specific dialogues, impositions, and inventions. "Cultural" difference is no longer a stable, exotic otherness; self-other relations are matters of power and rhetoric rather than of essence. A whole structure of expectations about authenticity in culture and in art is thrown in doubt.

The new relations of ethnographic displacement were registered with precocious clarity in the writings of Victor Segalen and Michel Leiris. Both would have to unlearn the forms that once organized the experience of travel in a time when "home" and "abroad," "self" and "other," "savage" and "civilized" seemed more clearly opposed. Their writings betray an unease with narratives of escape and return, of initiation and conquest. They do not claim to know a distanced "exotic," to bring back its secrets, to objectively describe its landscapes, customs, languages. Everywhere they go they register complex encounters. In Segalen's words the new traveler expresses "not simply his vision, but through an instantaneous, constant *transfer*, the echo of his presence." China becomes an allegorical mirror. Leiris' fieldwork in a "phantom Africa" throws him back on a relentless self-ethnography—not autobiography but an act of writing his existence in a present of memories, dreams, politics, daily life.

Twentieth-century identities no longer presuppose continuous cultures or traditions. Everywhere individuals and groups improvise local performances from (re)collected pasts, drawing on foreign media, symbols, and languages. This existence among fragments has often been portrayed as a process of ruin and cultural decay, perhaps most eloquently by Claude Lévi-Strauss in *Tristes tropiques* (1955). In Lévi-Strauss's global vision—one widely shared today—authentic human differences are disintegrating, disappearing in an expansive commodity culture to become, at best, collectible "art" or "folklore." The great narrative of entropy and loss in *Tristes tropiques* expresses an inescapable, sad truth. But it is too neat, and it assumes a questionable Eurocentric position at the "end" of a unified human history, gathering up, memorializing the world's local

historicités. Alongside this narrative of progressive monoculture a more ambiguous "Caribbean" experience may be glimpsed. In my account Aimé Césaire, a practitioner of "neologistic" cultural politics, represents such a possibility—organic culture reconceived as inventive process or creolized "interculture" (Wagner 1980; Drummond 1981).⁴ The roots of tradition are cut and retied, collective symbols appropriated from external influences. For Césaire culture and identity are inventive and mobile. They need not take root in ancestral plots; they live by pollination, by (historical) transplanting.

The "filth" that an expansive West, according to the disillusioned traveler of *Tristes tropiques* (p. 38), has thrown in the face of the world's societies appears as raw material, compost for new orders of difference. It is also filth. Modern cultural contacts need not be romanticized, erasing the violence of empire and continuing forms of neocolonial domination. The Caribbean history from which Césaire derives an inventive and tactical "negritude" is a history of degradation, mimicry, violence, and blocked possibilities. It is also rebellious, syncretic, and creative. This kind of ambiguity keeps the planet's local futures uncertain and open. There is no master narrative that can reconcile the tragic and comic plots of global cultural history.

It is easier to register the loss of traditional orders of difference than to perceive the emergence of new ones. Perhaps this book goes too far in its concern for ethnographic presents-becoming-futures. Its utopian, persistent hope for the reinvention of difference risks downplaying the destructive, homogenizing effects of global economic and cultural centralization. Moreover, its Western assumption that assertions of "tradition" are always responses to the new (that there is no real recurrence in history) may exclude local narratives of cultural continuity and recovery. I do not tell all the possible stories. As an Igbo saying has it, "You do not stand in one place to watch a masquerade."

My primary goal is to open space for cultural futures, for the recog-

4. For recent work on the historical-political invention of cultures and traditions see, among others, Comaroff 1985; Guss 1986; Handler 1985; Handler and Linnekin 1984; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Taussig 1980, 1987; Whisnant 1983; and Cantwell 1984. Familiar approaches to "culture-contact," "syncretism," and "acculturation" are pressed farther by the concepts of "interference" and "interference" (Fischer 1986:219, 232; Baumgarten 1982:154), "transculturation" (Rama 1982; Pratt 1987), and "intercultural intertexts" (Tedlock and Tedlock 1985).

nition of emergence. This requires a critique of deep-seated Western habits of mind and systems of value. I am especially skeptical of an almost automatic reflex—in the service of a unified vision of history—to relegate exotic peoples and objects to the collective past (Fabian 1983). The inclusive orders of modernism and anthropology (the “we” riding in Williams’ car, the Mankind of Western social science) are always deployed at the end point or advancing edge of History. Exotic traditions appear as archaic, purer (and more rare) than the diluted inventions of a syncretic present. In this temporal setup a great many twentieth-century creations can only appear as imitations of more “developed” models. The Elsie of the planet are still traveling nowhere their own.

Throughout the world indigenous populations have had to reckon with the forces of “progress” and “national” unification. The results have been both destructive and inventive. Many traditions, languages, cosmologies, and values are lost, some literally murdered; but much has simultaneously been invented and revived in complex, oppositional contexts. If the victims of progress and empire are weak, they are seldom passive. It used to be assumed, for example, that conversion to Christianity in Africa, Melanesia, Latin America, or even colonial Massachusetts would lead to the extinction of indigenous cultures rather than to their transformation. Something more ambiguous and historically complex has occurred, requiring that we perceive *both* the end of certain orders of diversity and the creation or translation of others (Fernandez 1978). More than a few “extinct” peoples have returned to haunt the Western historical imagination.⁵ It is difficult, in any event, to equate the future of “Catholicism” in New Guinea with its current prospects in Italy; and Protestant Christianity in New Caledonia is very different from its diverse Nigerian forms. The future is not (only) monoculture.⁶

5. The continued tribal life of California Indians is a case in point. Even, most notorious of all, the genocidal “extinction” of the Tasmanians now seems a much less definitive “event.” After systematic decimations, with the 1876 death of Truganina, the last “pure” specimen (playing a mythic role similar to that of Ishi in California), the race was scientifically declared dead. But Tasmanians did survive and intermarried with aboriginals, whites, and Maori. In 1978 a committee of inquiry reported between four and five thousand persons eligible to make land claims in Tasmania (Stocking 1987:283).

6. Research specifically on this issue is being conducted by Ulf Hannerz and his colleagues at the University of Stockholm on “the world system of culture.” In an early statement Hannerz confronts the widespread assumption that “cultural diversity is waning, and the same single mass culture will soon be

To reject a single progressive or entropic metanarrative is not to deny the existence of pervasive global processes unevenly at work. The world is increasingly connected, though not unified, economically and culturally. Local particularism offers no escape from these involvements. Indeed, modern ethnographic histories are perhaps condemned to oscillate between two metanarratives: one of homogenization, the other of emergence; one of loss, the other of invention. In most specific conjunctures both narratives are relevant, each undermining the other’s claim to tell “the whole story,” each denying to the other a privileged, Hegelian vision. Everywhere in the world distinctions are being destroyed and created; but the new identities and orders of difference are more reminiscent of Williams’ Elsie than of Edward Curtis’ idealized “vanishing” American Indians. The histories of emergent differences require other ways of telling: Césaire’s impure cultural poetics, Said’s dispersed “Palestinian Lives,” Mashpee’s reinvented tradition—there is no single model. This book surveys several hybrid and subversive forms of cultural representation, forms that prefigure an inventive future. In the last decades of the twentieth century, ethnography begins from the inescapable fact that Westerners are not the only ones going places in the modern world.

But have not travelers always encountered worldly “natives”? Strange anticipation: the English Pilgrims arrive at Plymouth Rock in The New World only to find Squanto, a Patuxet, just back from Europe.

everywhere.” He is skeptical: “I do not think it is only my bias as an anthropologist with a vested interest in cultural variation which makes it difficult for me to recognize that the situation for example in Nigeria could be anything like this. The people in my favorite Nigerian town drink Coca Cola, but they drink *buruku* too; and they can watch *Charlie’s Angels* as well as Hausa drummers on the television sets which spread rapidly as soon as electricity has arrived. My sense is that the world system, rather than creating massive cultural homogeneity on a global scale, is replacing one diversity with another; and the new diversity is based relatively more on interrelations and less on autonomy” (Hannerz n.d.: 6).