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Après coup

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APRÈS COUP

James CLIFFORD*

Reading one's words in translation is always an experience of estrangement. One sees, hears, oneself from a distance – another person in a different time. And of course any translation, however faithful, is something new, a performance for unimagined audiences. What could *Writing Culture* possibly mean, what work might it do, for French readers in 2011? In his astute introduction Emir Mahieddin suggests that the book, and more importantly the arguments that followed its appearance twenty-five years ago, have attained a kind of « classic » status. No longer a « succès de scandale », *Writing Culture* can perhaps be read for what it actually says.

In North America when « postmodernism » was resisted, the barbarians at the gates were often associated with « French theory. » In France, « le postmodernisme Américain » was similarly held at arms length. But of course the Zeitgeist, of which *Writing Culture* was a product, transgressed national borders. Many of the trends associated with the book had their own French trajectories in the work of Jean Jamin, Jeanne Favret-Saada, Jean Bazin, and Alban Bensa, to name just a few prominent anthropological examples. And I might also mention Bruno Latour or François

* University of California – History of Consciousness Department
Santa Cruz, CA 95064. USA
Courriel : jcliff@ucsc.edu

Hartog. The interdisciplinary openness of *L'Homme* under Jamin's editorship seems very much in the experimental spirit of *Writing Culture*. And yet, as Mahieddin notes, there has been resistance, a sustained suspicion of trends that were pervasive across the Atlantic and the English Channel: cultural studies, deconstruction, feminist theory, various neo-Marxisms, critical studies of race and ethnicity. Ten years ago, a trip on the Eurostar from London to Paris felt like entering a different intellectual world. In the bookstores: where were the topics that filled the British shelves? Where was race? Feminism? Deconstruction? One looked in vain for Stuart Hall, Fredric Jameson, Donna Haraway, Paul Gilroy, Judith Butler – or their local equivalents. Today the situation seems to be changing, the general attitude less insular – certainly among younger scholars. Perhaps *Writing Culture* will finally have its moment in France.

Yet as I read these words of mine, made new in French, I feel most profoundly their historicity, their distance. *Writing Culture*'s index contains no entry for « globalization. » There's no « internet ». No « postcolonial ». So much has changed in these twenty-five years. How can the changes be understood? What kind of a story can be told? In retrospect I have come to believe that a profound transformation of power relations and discursive locations has been going on. Call it, for short, *the de-centering of the West*. Anthropology has been an inextricable part of this de-centering, and so have its critiques-books like *Writing Culture*.

A conversation from the early 1970s comes to mind. I was a doctoral student doing research work at the London School of Economics in the Malinowski papers, and one day outside the library I found myself chatting about the history of his discipline with Raymond Firth, the great anthropologist of Tikopia. Firth had been a student and colleague of Malinowski. He shook his head over attempts to connect anthropological research with colonial power, in particular the important book edited by Talal Asad, *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter*. Without minimizing the issue, Firth thought the relations of anthropology and empire were more complex than some of the critics were suggesting. He shook his head in a mixture of pretended and real confusion. What

happened? Not so long ago we were radicals. We thought of ourselves as gadflies and reformers, advocates for indigenous cultures. Now, all of a sudden, we're handmaidens of empire!

This is what it is like to feel « historical ». The marking of colonialism as a period (with a possible ending) came suddenly to Euro-American liberal scholars, at least those who noticed the changing times. Who would have predicted in the early 1950s that within a decade most of France and Britain's colonies would be formally independent? Feeling historical is like a rug pulled out: a gestalt change perhaps, or a sense of sudden relocation, of being seen from some previously hidden perspective. For Euro-American anthropology, the experience of a sometimes hostile identification as a *Western* science, a purveyor of « partial truths », has been a troubling, alienating, and potentially enriching process. The same hard learning experience challenged many scholars of my generation with respect to gender and race.

In retrospect, I see the twenty-five years of *Writing Culture* within a larger, postwar narrative of geo-political transformation and re-positioning. This vision reflects a personal experience, like Firth's, of being re-positioned. Born in 1945, I grew up in the peace of the victors: the Cold War standoff and a sustained, American-led economic boom. My fundamental sense of reality – of what actually existed and was possible – was formed in circumstances of unprecedented material prosperity and security. Of course my generation experienced recurring fears of nuclear annihilation. But since disarmament was not around the corner we learned, on a daily basis, to live with « the balance of terror ». In all other respects the world seemed stable and expansive, at least to a middle-class North American. We would never lack resources; wars were fought somewhere else. The lines of geo-political antagonism were clear and seemingly manageable.

The naturalness of this reality began to slip after 1965, when « the sixties » and the war in Vietnam got seriously out of control. For a time, everything was in question. Deepened political and cultural conflicts unleashed utopian energies: « The Revolution » (in more than Marxist senses) could be invoked without irony. In

the academic world where I studied and then worked, the sixties (never a simple chronological marker) extended through the seventies. A progressive decolonization of modes of thought was underway. As an emerging intellectual I was caught up in contestations of disciplinary authority, the opening of canons and institutions, the claims of multiculturalism, feminism, and anti-racism. These movements both empowered and constrained my thinking, a double determination that my introduction to *Writing Culture* tried to express, awkwardly and *in medias res*.

The global sixties eventually sputtered to an end, their critical and utopian energies co-opted by commercialized popular culture or circumscribed in identity-based social movements, avant-garde art worlds, and academic enclaves. By the mid 1980s, the end of the postwar economic boom and the dominance of neo-liberalism under Thatcher and Reagan had become inescapable facts of life. The fall of the Soviet Union after 1989 was followed by a decade of « uni-polar » U.S. megalomania, the victor enjoying the spoils. Market-driven globalization would be widely celebrated (« The End of History ») and attacked (the « Battle of Seattle », José Bové's assault on MacDonald's). A newly flexible and polycentric world system seemed to be a relentless machine for restructuring the local in terms of the global. The system's fundamental instability - economies reliant on financial speculation and bloated credit, ungovernable flows of people and information – would emerge only later.

Writing Culture, a product of the early 80s, can be understood as either a « late sixties » or an « early nineties » work. The book's critical energy and reforming zeal, its sense of (neo)colonization as the principal locus of power relations, signal the sixties genealogy. But if one compares an influential precursor, Dell Hymes' collection, *Reinventing Anthropology* (1969) the changes are clear. *Writing Culture* is distinctly post-sixties in style and emphasis: its acute awareness of discursive determination, its focus on representations as social forces that constitute subjects in relations of power. The world it expresses is more that of Foucault than of Fanon.

As the sixties waned, visions of revolution were replaced by defensive reactions, cultural and intellectual tactics of subversion or critique. Newly inventive forms of trans-national capitalism, supported by « Americanized » cultural commodities, were evidently the most powerful forces in the world. Frontal resistance to flexible accumulation and neo-liberal hegemony seemed useless. But what could not be overthrown might at least be undermined, transgressed, opened up. For many intellectuals working inside Euro-American centers of power this meant supporting « diversity » in both epistemological and socio-cultural registers. Space could be cleared for discrepant senses of the real, positions staked out for future struggles. In the absence of radical, systemic change, dominant forms of authority and common sense could at least be criticized, theoretically disassembled. *Writing Culture*, with its rejection of monological authority and commitment to experimentation, made sense in this conjuncture. Its style of critique was at home there.

Today, things are different. We struggle to make sense of a more volatile, polycentric world. The neo-liberal hegemony which reached its apogee in the 1990s seems to be collapsing. The future is, to put it mildly, uncertain. We cannot count on any world system to reconstitute itself. Or any revolutionary agent to point the way. In the present confusion, it is at least clear that a stable American-led geo-political order will be rebuilt. Whatever political-economic accommodations the present transition makes possible, they will not include the guarantees of material prosperity, political power, and cultural centrality, within which I lived and worked for a half century. That bubble has burst. And I find myself, today, feeling « historical » with a vengeance – the fear and excitement of entering times that cannot be narrated. The un-representable conjuncture.

Writing Culture expressed – with insight and blindness – tectonic shifts in global culture and society. My introduction tried to suggest as much, though without the perspective afforded by our current perch in the new millennium. Whatever happens next, emerging global and local forms of power and relationship will call

James Clifford

out fresh ethnographic strategies. Perhaps the critical, experimental, resources still to be found in *Writing Culture's* toolbox will come in handy.

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