



Introduction

The Illusion of Anthropological Identity

These representations and politics of the invisible belong to the order of the *imaginaire*. As Deleuze said, “the *imaginaire* is not the unreal, but the inability to distinguish the real from the unreal.” All the same, the *imaginaire* is not constituted once and for all; it is “constitutive.”

—Jean-François Bayart, *The Illusion of Cultural Identity*

This book is admittedly based on a series of articles published in diverse journals that seem on the surface to deal with concretely distinct issues. Over the years, it has become increasingly clear that these issues are part of core problematics inherent to anthropology as a discipline. All these articles have been expanded and, more importantly, restructured to synthesize central themes that drive this book. Having gradually dissociated myself from anthropology to teach in “interdisciplinary” cultural studies and published more in nonanthropological journals, it is somewhat ironic that I have chosen to address this overdetermined field of anthropological theory. Without doubt, the major impetus was prompted by a desire to develop further several of the more provocative articles that had been limited by standard journal word counts. Since I argue throughout here that interdisciplinarity is a myth, especially in the realm of theory, it is possible to juxtapose this argument against the institutional trends of academic neoliberalism that have galvanized existing disciplines into readily discreet niche discursive communities.

Sherry Ortner’s (1984) “Theory in Anthropology since the Sixties” represents perhaps an uncontestedly clear characterization of the state of anthropological theory or its history of thought, at least until the 1980s, which

probably mirrors the way in which other social scientific disciplines literally characterize their own theoretical development. Anthropology in the 1980s might have been “coming apart,” but its development from the 1960s on was still defined by the formation of distinct “schools of thought.” In her article, Ortner cites well-known examples, such as symbolic anthropology, cultural ecology, structuralism, Marxism, political economy, and practice, mainly as a preamble to her interest in developing a more integrated approach to culture, power, and social agency. Anthropological identification to a recognizable school of thought (or grand theory) was at this time quite common, and the history of anthropological thought was typically taught in this way. Needless to say, the content of any theory was taken seriously. Alien schools of thought might have been considered “fictive,” but identification to one’s own school was substantively real. Foucauldian interpretations of theory as “discourse,” in its early version as episteme or later versions as knowledge/power agents within a modern disciplinary system, were probably not welcome in this depiction of theory. On the other hand, I argue that such theory is a discourse in many senses, driven by a disciplinary *imaginaire*.

To be sure, much anthropological work has had a significant impact in other disciplines. This can be combined with the work of professional anthropologists whose training and influence have been inherently interdisciplinary yet moved the discipline greatly. Nonetheless, despite the general nature of culture and society as phenomena and concepts, it is possible to ask why certain notions, even those that seem to proliferate in many disciplines, have appeal mainly within narrow specialized niches, despite the literal, open-ended nature of theory. Marx, Durkheim, and Weber seem to share the same exalted status of classical theory in anthropology and sociology, but different readings of the same text have produced bases for different schools of thought. One can also argue that its appropriation within anthropology has subtly differed from sociology in ways that have more to do with disciplinary relevance than content per se. One can then contrast the curious fate of Clifford Geertz in anthropology, despite his continued influence in other disciplines, with the impact of *Writing Culture*’s critique of his authorial subjectivity. If writing is general to any social science, theory above all, one will be hard-pressed to explain why the influence of this critique has been limited to anthropology.

Anthropological theory has never been viewed seriously as a discourse, not simply as the product of authorial subjectivity but more importantly in how the content of its ideas is seen as shaped by disciplinary relevance. In Foucault’s early work, theories were defined less by their relationship to an object of gazing than their shaping by epistemes that were broadly transdisciplinary in nature and encompassed explicit schools of thought. This early notion of discourse may have been transformed into “spaces of dispersion” created by the evolution of institutional practices that gave birth to social

scientific disciplines, but they are imaginations par excellence—in other words, authorial creations within well-defined yet abstract mind-sets.

One is generally aware that such mind-sets exist, however defined, but one tends to be less cognizant of how they influence the shaping of ideas and systemic paradigms. It would not be inaccurate to regard such mind-sets ultimately as a kind of identification. Identity is a thoroughly misunderstood term, even in the social sciences. Identifying as an anthropologist means to some extent assimilating to the ethos or mind-set that guides one in professional or analytical practice, and hence authorial subjectivity. However, that subjectivity not only refers to “roots” but should also include the totality of institutional practices that constrain and regulate the paradigms being advanced. In other words, behind the text is a context, which is itself a field of (authorial) practice; the spaces of dispersion that characterize this identification are termed here “geopragnatics”: the mapping out in conceptual space of our speaking position. In the geopragnatics of anthropological identification, there is a space of conceptual relevance, an authorial subjectivity, and a politics for critical theorization and disciplinary worldview.

This book is thus divided into three parts. The first discusses the concept of identity and its relevance to anthropological discourse. The second is a somewhat different take on the theme of anthropology’s authorial subjectivity, which reveals on the one hand the provincial nature of the *Writing Culture* controversy and then argues in turn how it can be made general to all social scientific writing. The third engages the literature on postcolonial theory in order to show how, despite its prevalence at a literal level in literary criticism, it can be used to offer a critical articulation of cultural difference, not only to “provincialize” theory, in Dipesh Chakrabarty’s (2000) terms, but ultimately to provide the grounds for other possible genres of critical intervention.

Part I, “Anthropological Reifications from Ethnicity to Identity,” comprises two chapters. The first is an expansion of an article in *Anthropological Theory* (Chun 2009), which takes issue with the understanding of ethnicity, culture, and identity in both the anthropological and sociological literature, especially in light of recent debates. It is necessary to problematize their usage in order to clarify their presumed objective and subjective nature and then to show in what regard the inherent subjectivity of identity makes it prone to politics and the strategies of choice in ways that contrast with the concepts of ethnicity and culture. This is a necessary preamble for showing how the concept of identity in particular is discursive and thus not prone to rules that have typically governed anthropological discussions of ethnicity and culture. Being subjective by nature, identity is then a function of pragmatic laws, not semantic ones, and thus do not engender the kind of systemic meaning that has typically dominated ethnicity and culture. To counter criticisms that greeted the original journal article, I maintain that the anthropology of ethnic relations has

not evolved much beyond Frederik Barth (1969). More saliently, this is an attempt to bridge recent criticism by Rogers Brubaker (2004) about the implicit groupism of the concept of ethnicity and reservations about the usefulness of identity put forth by Richard Handler (1994) and other social constructionists. At another level, what Barth viewed in ethnographic terms as ethnicity is less an objective attribute of difference than one's subjective perception.

The second chapter traces the history of the concept of diaspora, as it has diffused from one niche to another and its meaning or concrete referent has mutated accordingly. As a case study, my focus is less on assessing the usefulness of this concept in literal terms or its exact relationship to existing phenomena so characterized. It is perhaps necessary to distinguish the nature of diaspora as cultural phenomenon as separate from its role as conceptual problematic. The different disciplinary usages of this term reveal to some extent how it is invoked in some contexts as an explanatory concept while in others serves an emancipatory function in a critical theory of culture. The controversy over diaspora ultimately shows why diasporic identity has become a problematic entity that has never been satisfactorily defined. This is a problem that actually transcends disciplinary usages and has important ramifications for how one views its objective and subjective attributes and then subsequently its critical value, if any.

The supposed relevance of diaspora, as a phenomenon, to anthropology is less important than the ways in which diaspora, as a concept, can be used to invoke a politics of identity, especially anthropological ones, which contrast with the politics of identity prevalent in other genres of cultural studies in general. Needless to say, the politics of identity is related to actor agency. Before its current revision as a chapter, the original article was rejected by several diaspora-related or ethnicity-oriented journals. Their inability to consider subjective identification as a relevant factor in defining and explaining diasporic attachment is in part attributable to their reliance on the objective criteria used to evaluate the solidary nature of ethnicity. On the other hand, the politics of identity in cultural studies of various genres used to invoke diaspora as a critical class value tend to overemphasize its subjective desirability over objective attributes.

Part II, "Beyond the Imagined Community of Writing Culture," is an alternative take on authorial subjectivity, comprising two chapters. The first is an expansion of a review essay of James Clifford's work that I wrote in *boundary 2* (Chun 2015). Asked to review his most recent book, *Returns*, I eventually decided to review his entire trilogy in order to assess the evolution of his work and comment more comprehensively on the scope of his thinking in relation to a changing anthropology and other competing approaches. Clifford's transition is in one respect a gradual formation, especially in methodological terms, of a distinctive approach to cultural analysis in anthropology. At the same

time, it was a deliberate transition to move away from his early position as outsider to one that increasingly embraced an empathetic anthropological identity. Nonetheless, anthropology still remembers him most for his critique of ethnographic authority, which gave birth to “new ethnography.” The original review essay was significantly expanded to include “the fate of Geertz,” who was the implicit object of literary criticism in *Writing Culture*. Despite Geertz’s diminished authority in anthropology, his work continued to inspire “cultural turns” in many other disciplines, for which there is already a voluminous literature. Nonetheless, it is necessary to explain why a critique of authorial subjectivity never undermined the salience of an interpretive approach to cultural meaning, despite appearances to the contrary. Moreover, in the context of this book, I reassess authorial subjectivity to make a rather different point in the long run. On the one hand, Clifford’s critique actually exposes the provincial nature of an anthropological “knowledge.” If all disciplines have authors, one must ask why only anthropologists felt prone to such attacks, unlike other social “sciences.”

In the next chapter, I explore seriously the other half of this alternative take on the “author.” If all social science analysts are authors, this should have unsettling ramifications for the presumed “objective” nature of such knowledge, most of all what one terms “theory.” This chapter is an extensive restructuring of an article that first appeared in *Anthropological Theory* (Chun 2005). It is not surprising that anthropologists and sociologists who write and produce “theory” are least likely to regard it as a discourse, or a process of writing, in Foucault’s terms. A comparison of Durkheim’s *The Division of Labor in Society* and Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* as narratives (in a literary sense) of the evolution of modern society provides the basis not only for showing how different readings of the same text can produce different theories but also for exposing how authorial subjectivity is embedded in the imaginative construction of any such knowledge. Modern theory is already to some extent a reification of what started in a “classical” era as critical reflections on local, social phenomena (capitalism, modernity), not unlike contemporary political criticism of ongoing social problems, which have over time been “disciplined” in institutional terms, giving rise to niche “professional” mind-sets/practices.

If what we take to be theory is rooted in the grounded critique of historically constituted social experience, how can we be sure that the concepts that we use to make sense of the facts are not culturally tainted by given local nuances? Sociology, like most other social sciences, which has its origins in the West expanding outward, would seem to be especially prone to it.

Part III—“Can the Postcolonial Speak in Sociological Theory?”—directly addresses the politics of authorial subjectivity. If there is nothing inherently “objectifying” about cultural interpretation, it is still difficult to prove/show that it is immune from politicizing, explicit or implicit. I deliberately contrast

sociological critique in its classical heyday with how those same ideas have been appropriated by professional disciplines then systematically promoted as school of thought or theory, partly to suggest that there is a space for critical intervention (politics) that should complement the interpretive process. However, the source of my critical reflexivity comes from two unlikely sources: debates on postcolonialism and the nation-state.

This part comprises two chapters. The first contrasts two approaches to postcolonial “culturalist” critique. It is prompted by problems in the recent literature on postcolonial theory, one fraught by disciplinary inconsistencies of definition, which has been complicated also by the specific niches that gave rise to disciplinary mind-sets. On the other hand, one can assess certain theoretical ramifications of subaltern studies, albeit rooted in a different historicity and thematic debates. These two postcolonial approaches have been misleadingly depicted in the literature as metropolitan versus nativist, poststructuralist versus historicist, and so on, which fails to capture the constructive differences between them as critical theories. Moreover, they both converge from different angles to present the bases of a critique of Eurocentric social theory. Despite its explicit application mostly in literature, postcolonial critique in the genre of Edward Said’s (1978) *Orientalism* has essentially provided a sophisticated take on the politics of cultural difference that is not limited to the study of colonialism per se. Subaltern studies, as initially conceived by Ranajit Guha (1983), was less a counter-narrative to Indian nationalist history than a response to British Marxist theories of social evolution. His notion of “dominance without hegemony” resonated far beyond India. Both postcolonial critiques intersect interestingly in Chakrabarty’s (2000) *Provincializing Europe*. Read literally as a cultural critique of Eurocentric universal history, one can also find here the basis for a critique of Eurocentric social theory. It is paradoxical and illuminating that postcolonialism as a mode of thought has influenced some disciplines more than others. Why its influence has been negligible in sociology goes far beyond its relevance in literal terms (or lack of it) and should have ramifications for sociological theory in general.

In defining postcolonial critique in this way, I have underscored its potential as a critical mode of authorial self-reflexivity in ways that are actually consistent with Clifford’s *Writing Culture* gaze while at the same time exposing the fact that much of self-proclaimed postcolonial theory, especially in the genre of Homi Bhabha and similar literary critics, was never really about colonialism in a literal sense (as historical phenomenon). From the opposite perspective, it is undeniably easy for us to recognize that much significant work on historical colonialism has been done and theorized by anthropologists, yet why has our own influence on so-called Western literary postcolonial theory been relatively negligible by comparison?¹

Finally, while the literature on nation-states has focused mainly on the origins and nature of the institution and cultural mind-set, similar analyses of its “unseen presence” and regimes of cultural “mystification” overlap in many ways with the politics of cultural difference that has dominated debates on postcolonial critique. I argue ultimately that politics of/in culture can explain not merely the nature of the nation-state as a phenomenon but also reveal how its unseen presence has infiltrated routine “theories” of culture and society, not unlike how Foucault has shown the complicity of social science in the regulation of modern discipline. The last chapter starts with an analysis of a previously unpublished article by Geoffrey Benjamin ([1985] 2015), “The Unseen Presence: A Theory of the Nation-State and Its Mystifications,” and then attempts to show how it overlaps with the work of Ernest Gellner and Benedict Anderson to present a cultural imaginary that is in a crucial sense a progressive, constructed reality, which entails what Philip Abrams ([1977] 1988), a political sociologist, regards as the basis of modern society’s moral regulation. Not only is this unseen presence “an unacceptable domination,” in Abrams’s terms, but the critical theory that Benjamin suggests is not much different from the critical self-reflection that has driven the ethos of postcolonial critique. In effect, the culturalist theoretical critique that I ultimately foresee for society today is rooted not only in modernity but also in theory’s entanglement with it (Chun 2016).

Note

1. Writings by Talal Asad, Johannes Fabian, Ann Stoler, Bernard Cohn, and the Comaroffs readily come to mind.