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CAROL MURRAY

The Stolen Woman: Oral Narrative, Postmodernism and the Feminist Turn in Anthropology

INTRODUCTION

Postmodern critiques of modernism's claim to objective knowledge of the "Other" are seemingly well situated in application to the discipline of anthropology. In fact, one of postmodernism's key proponents, James Clifford, has decried modernist anthropology's claim to ethnographic authority. But Clifford's argument that anthropologists have access only to "partial truths" has in many quarters been met with vociferous opposition. One anthropologist has accused Clifford and his colleagues of a "millennial" takeover of academia (Sangren). In addition, Frances Mascia-Lees *et al.* argue that feminist anthropologists may be better placed than theorists of the postmodern to understand the politics of the "Other," since feminist theory has been grappling with issues of "Self" and "Other" for several decades.

This paper will address the application of a postmodern feminism to anthropology by examining the approach used by Julie Cruikshank in her work with Athapaskan women and their oral histories. Cruikshank is not only interested in determining why oral narratives collected by ethnographers at the turn of the century still have purchase in today's cultural context, but she is also interested in understanding why women's journey narratives differ from those of men. Her approach to these two questions informs my own question, namely of how to apply postmodern feminism to anthropology.

POSTMODERN FEMINISM

Many contemporary feminists have become aware of the limitations of the essentialist or cultural feminist theory that was the legacy of the seventies and eighties. Perhaps the key issue of the postmodernist nineties, stresses Rosemary Hennessey, is "the impact of the general crisis of knowledge on its historical subject" (Hennessey xi). Postmodernism, in its diatribe against the totalizing metanarrative, has engendered a shift in feminist theory from its former

monologic view of the "essential" woman, to an appreciation of the plurality of voices that are socially constructed by the rubric "woman."

The "crisis of knowledge" referred to by Hennessey has its roots in the modernist episteme based on the Cartesian/Enlightenment belief that man [sic] is a rational being capable of objective knowledge. Man, then, is a knowing subject, and knowledge inheres in the object of study, not in man himself. Postmodernists, on the other hand, have argued that knowledge is socially constructed and plural. The opposition between knowing subject and its object creates the false notion that there is an objective Truth that can be known. a seamless metanarrative that in fact obscures a continual vying for legitimization among discursive fields. Joan Scott describes this process whereby discursive fields attain legitimization:

Discursive fields overlap, influence, and compete with one another: they appeal to one another's "truths" for authority and legitimization. These truths are assumed to be outside human invention, either already known and self-evident or discoverable through scientific inquiry. Precisely because they are assigned the status of objective knowledge, they seem to be beyond dispute and thus serve a powerful legitimating function. (1990, 136)

Meaning in discourse is seen to be derived from difference, based on Saussurean structuralist linguistics in which a term derives its meaning from fixed opposition or negation to another term. This linguistic analogy has purchase in the Western philosophical tradition which, as Derrida argues, rests on hierarchical binary oppositions (unity/diversity, identity/difference, presence/absence, universality/specificity) (Scott). The first terms are accorded primacy and form the basis of objective knowledge. Similarly, social values regarded as truths gain their meaning through binary opposition in which the term "colonizer," for example, is defined through reified difference to the term "colonized."

The chief work of a postmodernist critic is to deconstruct the seamless whole of a totalizing discourse in order to tease out its hidden meanings. The point is not to annihilate difference, however. Barbara Johnson states that it is the differences *within entities*, repressed by the differences between entities, that the critic attempts to uncover thereby revealing "patterns of meaning that may undercut" (in Scott 1990, 138) the hegemony of the dominant discourse. Catherine Belsey notes that "the work of criticism is to release possible meanings" or inherent contradictions in a text or discourse:

Ideology, masquerading as coherence and plenitude, is in reality inconsistent, limited, contradictory.... The object of deconstructing the text is to examine the *process of its production* ... to locate the point of contradiction within the text.... Composed of contradictions, the text is no longer restricted to a single, harmonious and authoritative reading. Instead it becomes *plural*, open to re-reading, no longer an object for passive

consumption but an object of work by the reader to produce meaning. (144)

Through deconstruction, then, the postmodern critic reveals the socially constructed nature of knowledge and, more importantly, the underlying power structure that this knowledge legitimates.

Until recently, feminist theory, with its roots in the Enlightenment era, has asserted that women too are rational subjects, capable of attaining objective knowledge. The aim of these feminists was to question the primacy of the male in the male/female hierarchy and to assert the equality of both male and female.¹ Sandra Harding argues, for example, that feminist epistemology (particularly the quest for scientific knowledge) can be categorized by two alternate methods: *feminist empiricism*, in which "sexist and androcentric biases can be eliminated [from scientific research] by stricter adherence to the existing methodological norms of scientific inquiry"; and *feminist standpoint theory*, which holds that "knowledge ... is supposed to be grounded in experience. But what has counted as knowledge in modern, Western cultures originates in and is tested against a certain limited and distorted kind of social experience. The experiences arising from the activities assigned to women ... provide a starting point for developing potentially more complete and less distorted knowledge claims than do men's experiences" (Harding 91).² Both of these methods call for the inclusion of women in Western epistemological endeavours — a method referred to by Marilyn Boxer as "add-women-and-stir" (in Strathern 282). Nevertheless, as Susan Hekman notes, because this approach does not eliminate the dualistic assumption of the rational knowing subject and the objectification of knowledge implicit in the discourse of Western epistemology, a mere shuffling of the binary terms male/female will not result in social justice but it rather perpetuates dualistic Enlightenment thought. Although Harding states that "it is reasonable to see feminist standpoint theory as in tension with central Enlightenment assumptions," she also notes that "it is not clear how [a specifically feminist alternative to Enlightenment projects] may take leave of Enlightenment assumptions and still remain feminist. The critics are right that feminism (also) stands on Enlightenment ground" (Harding 98-99). Hekman argues, however, that a feminist standpoint can generate political opposition to modern hegemonic discourses:

1 Some would prefer to see the hierarchy inverted and a privileging of the female over the male. As Hekman notes, however, this privileging merely perpetuates the duality of Enlightenment thought and forces the construction of an "other" in order to impose a privileging of the female.

2 See Hennessey (especially pages 67-99) for a discussion of feminist standpoint theory. Scott's "Experience" explains how women's experience could be incorporated into feminist theory.

The silences and ambiguities of discourse provide the possibility of refashioning them, the discovery of other conceptualizations, the revision of accepted truths. These refashionings and revisions lead to [another] aspect: the formulation of the feminine, the masculine and sexuality in a different way. (Hekman 187)

Postmodern feminism, then, by deconstructing modernist assumptions, results in the "refashioning" of new conceptions of truth. Implicit in this reformulation is the deconstruction of the concept of "woman." Rather than being a biologically essentialist term that implies a sisterhood of women around the globe, the application of postmodernism to feminist theory has revealed the "embedded nature of gender" (di Leonardo 30) in which cross-currents of difference such as race, class, religion, age and sexual preference continually redefine the concept. This deconstruction of "woman" is particularly important for the theory and practice of feminist anthropology.

ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO POSTMODERN FEMINISM

Until recently, feminist approaches to anthropology have centred around a lively debate between universalist and evolutionist positions on male dominance. Sherry Ortner, for example, has posited that universal male domination has as its root cause perceptions of a dichotomy between nature as female and culture as male. Michelle Rosaldo has similarly determined that women are associated with private, domestic activities whereas men bask in the acclaim of the public sphere. Eleanor Leacock, on the other hand, has argued that male domination was not universal in indigenous societies, and that it was the advent of European colonization and the introduction of the fur trade that undermined these egalitarian cultures. Regardless of the perspective on the root cause of male domination, feminist anthropology was based on a cultural relativism which produced regional ethnographies describing local aspects of gender relations but which at the same time assumed a universal structuralist feminism based on Western critiques of patriarchal dominance and oppression.³

This approach of early feminist anthropologists has in effect created a colonization of difference — in which difference is noted and then subsumed by the dominant discourse — apparently modelled on its counterpart, modernist anthropology. At the inception of the discipline, armchair anthropologists commented upon the mores of savage cultures which they gleaned from the journals of discovery; during its colonial phase, they did likewise while sipping mint juleps on the verandah; with the advent of the modernist era, Malinowski introduced the concept of participant observation which he conducted from what

anthropologists often refer to as the "Malinowskian tent," set up amongst the natives themselves. With each increment of physical proximity, anthropologists were, presumably, better able to determine cultural behaviours from "the native's point of view" (Geertz 55).

Postmodern anthropology, however, has been critical of unexamined biases of modernist anthropology which it claims has precipitated a "crisis of representation." Clifford, for example, notes that "ethnographic truths are ... inherently partial" (7) because they are constructed and artificial, "caught up in the invention, not the representation, of cultures" (2). According to Clifford, "all constructed truths are made possible by powerful 'lies' of exclusion and rhetoric. Even the best ethnographic texts ... are systems, or economies, of truth. Power and history work through them, in ways their authors cannot fully control" (7). He therefore advocates a focus on the poetics of ethnography, a "fetishizing of form," that would incorporate Bakhtinian notions of the dialogic — the interplay of textual voices that would echo the polyvocal nature of cultural life.

As Clifford notes, this focus on form over content is "contestable," and, indeed, Mascia-Lees *et al.* have accused Clifford of "lies of exclusion" in that his edited monograph lacks feminist examples. Clifford, seemingly in anticipation of this objection, rationalizes this exclusion by claiming that

feminist ethnography has focused either on setting the record straight about women or on revising anthropological categories (for example, the nature/culture opposition). It has not produced either unconventional forms of writing or a developed reflection on ethnographic textuality as such. (21)⁴

This exclusion has led Mascia-Lees *et al.* to conclude that Clifford has defined the postmodern academic field so as to maintain male supremacy within it (see also Sangren). This accusation strikes at the heart of the feminist-postmodernist debate: if truth and knowledge are contingent and multiple, as postmodernism asserts, then the ontological status of the subject is undermined "at the very time when women and non-Western peoples have begun to claim themselves as

4 Lila Abu-Lughod questions this assertion of Clifford's and argues that there is a woman's tradition of unconventional ethnography — the "often excellent and popular ethnographies written by 'untrained' wives of anthropologists" (Abu-Lughod 152) such as Elizabeth Fernea's *Guests of the Sheik* (1965), Marjorie Shostak's *Nisa* (1981) (mentioned also by Mascia-Lees *et al.* and, interestingly, by Clifford himself), Edith Turner's *The Spirit of the Drum* (1987); and Margery Wolf's *The House of Lim* (1968). Abu-Lughod suggests that Clifford does not cite these examples because he is too caught up with the "rarefied" discourse of literary theory and philosophy to be concerned with "humdrum anthropology."

3 See Butler (1992), especially pages 3-9, for a discussion of the difficulties inherent in a universalist position.

subject.⁴⁵ Mascia-Lees *et al.* therefore conclude that "when Western white males — who traditionally have controlled the production of knowledge — can no longer define the truth ... their response is to conclude that there is no truth to be discovered." Mascia-Lees *et al.* continue with an accusation that postmodernism, despite its goal of deconstructing the hegemonic discourse of modernist anthropology, "may instead be ... reinforcing such power relations and preserving their [male] status as anthropologists, as authoritative speakers" (Mascia-Lees *et al.* 33).

The authors advocate that instead of merely exposing these power relations in ethnographic texts, "politically sensitive anthropologists" should attempt to overcome these power relations by

framing research questions according to the desires of the oppressed group, by choosing to do work that "others" want and need, by being clear for whom they are writing, and by adopting a feminist political framework that is suspicious of relationships with "others" that do not include a close and honest scrutiny of the motivations for research. (33)

Feminist ethnographers, then, are well situated both "inside and outside" the experience of the "other." They "know the experience of otherness ... from their time in the field" (33) but because they are also "other" to patriarchy's domination they are better able to transcend this "otherness" of the anthropological "subject" than the postmodernist ethnographer.

In a comment on this article, Vicki Kirby notes that the authors, by reverting to the binary of feminism/postmodernism, have not understood that "an effective political practice involves a negotiated strategy that relentlessly shuttles between commitment and its critical interrogation" (394) and instead legislate a return to a "clear politics." But this "nostalgia" for a "clear" and "honest" politics is reminiscent of the delusion of modernist anthropology — that the anthropologist can know the "other." Kirby rightly notes that this vision

depends upon the notion of a self-present, Cartesian subject whose desires could be transparent to scrutiny and therefore open to easy correction. It is this very assumption that empowers phallocentrism and ethnocentrism. Indeed, it is our inevitable complicity with these regimes that demands a much more subtly nuanced repertoire of political strategies than Mascia-Lees *et al.* are prepared to offer. (399-400)

5 Judith Butler (1992) also comments on this aspect of subjectivity: "There is the refrain that, just now, when women are beginning to assume the place of subjects, postmodern positions come along to announce that the subject is dead" (14). She cautions, however, that deconstruction does not imply the end of subjectivity but rather "is a way of interrogating its construction as a pregiven or foundationalist premise" (9) and therefore of opening up new possibilities for its meaning. Thus subjectivity is not a product but "the permanent possibility of a certain resignifying process" (13).

Mascia-Lees *et al.*, though, are concerned that a postmodernism that excludes or subsumes feminist experience problematizes its claim to subvert modernist hegemonic discourse. Others (see Spivak; Lazarus) are equally troubled by postmodernism's seemingly totalizing nature, a tendency that has prompted Terry Eagleton to comment that "the term 'post,' if it has any meaning at all, means business as usual, only more so" (qtd. in Lazarus 128). Although referring to postmodernism's nihilistic tendencies rather than the exclusion of feminist voices, Eagleton's critique points to a certain lack of political commitment that a philosophy dedicated to deconstructing totalizing theories and practices engenders, a commitment that Mascia-Lees *et al.* feel is central to anthropological practice and is most accessible from the perspective of the feminist practitioner.⁶

Mascia-Lees *et al.*, in a reply to Kirby's comment,⁷ clarify that it was not their intent to reify feminism at the expense of postmodernism but rather to express their disappointment that the textual innovations of postmodernism did not result in the hoped for "corrective to the politically suspect practices of traditional anthropology" (Mascia-Lees *et al.* 406). Here both parties agree: Kirby notes that Mascia-Lees *et al.* are "quite rightly targeting a certain postmodern posturing in some of the new ethnography that understands unconventional forms of writing to be an adequate disruption of the ethnographer's authorial voice" (399).

The alleged inadequacy of postmodern poetics in redressing the hegemonic politics of modernist anthropological discourse, reverts the debate between modernism and postmodernism to one of content (as opposed to form). Emphasis

6 Rey Chow notes in her article, "Postmodern Automations," this problem of the abandonment of nihilism: "The profusion of discourse and the illusion that every discourse has become permissible make it possible to associate postmodernism with a certain abandonment" (102). One of the central issues of feminism's grapple with postmodernism is how to address this conceptual abandonment while maintaining a commitment to political struggle (see also Fraser and Nicholson).

7 The debate at this point has become what can only be described as acrimonious and, in a conscious effort not to become embroiled in it, I have not repeated in any detail the issues discussed and rebutted by these authors. In summary, Mascia-Lees *et al.* accuse Kirby of unexamined self-interest and the intention of dismantling anthropology, apparently by her preference for a "subtly nuanced repertoire of political strategies" rather than a "clear politics, self-consciously constructed and constantly reformed and recreated as we negotiate ideological and institutional structures" (Mascia-Lees 407). It is interesting to note, however, that their tenacious grip on "clear politics" has resulted in their refusal of field work "due to ethical doubts" but that they are prevented from abandoning anthropology altogether only because of its "disruptive impact within the Eurocentric academy" (404). Nonetheless, it is apparent that these authors speak passionately for and defensively of anthropology in view of what they perceive as one of its detractors. Space limitations prevent a full discussion of the implications of these two views of the politics of anthropological commitment.

has shifted in recent postmodernist practice to the critique of political passivity noted earlier by coupling Marxist theories of subjective interpellation with a concept of agency. Althusser's concept of interpellation accounts for the process by which individuals are constructed as subjects who heed the call or "hailing" of ideological discourses:

We now understand this process of "subjection" as working through an address to unconscious fears and desires as well as rational interests, and we understand it as working through a multiplicity of disparate, complexly interconnected social apparatuses. Ideology is less tenacious as a "set of ideas" than as a system of representations, perceptions, and images that precisely encourages men and women to "see" their specific place in a historically peculiar social formation as inevitable, natural, a necessary function of the "real" itself. (Kavanagh 310)

Although interpellation, as described here, is a passive process, some postmodernist theorists have attempted to rectify this theoretical presumption of passivity. For example, Paul Smith, in speaking of the failure of interpellation, on occasion, to produce a "compliant subject," posits an active notion of agency or "the capacity to choose one discourse with which to counter another. Thus the 'subject' is attributed a power that is ... anti-interpellative, and this power is derived from access to discourses which have produced a different and ... contestatory subjectivity" (Smith 38).⁸

The notion of agency, then, can account for political resistance to culturally dominant ideological discourses and thus this particular nuance of postmodern practice subtly shifts the role of ethnographer from one of knowing advocate, as asserted by Mascia-Lees *et al.*, to one of (self-conscious) observer (and supporter) of resistance to hegemonic discourse — perpetrated both from within and outside particular societies — located within specific cultural practices (see Bourdieu, de Certeau). For feminist anthropologists, the practice of this postmodern anthropological theory affords an acknowledgement of an incipient and virtually universal male dominance but also encourages a "politics of

8 Judith Butler notes, however, that discussions of agency usually involve placing the subject in a culturally pre-existing location. Thus either agency is taken up by a prediscursive "I" or the subject is determined by discourse, thereby precluding the possibilities for agency. This epistemological assumption of a subject/object dichotomy, however, can be questioned and analyzed by a shift from "an epistemological account of identity to one which locates the problematic within practices of *signification*." The epistemological mode, then, is seen as "one possible and contingent signifying practice" (144). Signification involves the "repetition" of cultural rule-bound discourses that determine identity: "In a sense, all signification takes place within the orbit of the compulsion to repeat; 'agency,' then, is to be located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition" (145). For a critique of the Lacanian assumptions underlying discussions of subjectivity and agency in both Butler and Smith, see Mahoney and Yngvesson.

location."

Rosemary Coombe, for example, notes that one of the major emphases of postmodern anthropology is an exploration of "multiple and often contradictory cultural interpellations" (Coombe 114) which manifest themselves in local societies and which produce practices of resistance that are culturally specific.⁹ Although referring to post-industrial capitalist social relations, Coombe's description of localized resistance could also be applied to the hegemonic discourses of male domination:

In any society, the local consequences of such developments will be influenced by the indigenous conditions with which they must engage — conditions which are cultural as well as social and economic. Anthropologists are ever more aware of the significance of local systems of meaning in determining world capital's impact in non Western societies. Indigenous cultural values shape the transformations external forces engender and the ironies and resistances they generate. (Coombe 118)

Postmodernist anthropological practice, then, describes situated and localized "ethnographies of the particular — differential narratives of cultural, political and economic relationships" (Abu-Lughod).

Janice Boddy, in a description of postmodern feminism, notes a similar locational phenomenon. Through practice,¹⁰ "the interaction between an individual and her humanly constructed environment of objects, spaces, others" (Boddy 128), a concept of selfhood is formed. In order to analyze these practices, therefore, a postmodern feminist must "decenter, or dislocate, one's selfhood, one's subjectivity; paradoxically to take up a critical stance outside the discourse from within" (128).¹¹ Boddy suggests that what postmodern feminists are attempting to do, situated within but distanced from Western capitalist discourse, is "to constitute that entire discourse (and not only or specifically men) as an 'other' which requires critique — an artful re-description designed to expose its systematic plausibility to see womanhood and manhood as problematic, requiring re-contextualization, not reduction to essences" (128). This analysis uses "one's position, one's history and 'natural' language, as means — lenses — through which to view that position in a different light and, by so

9 The other being "to develop an approach to cultural phenomena that challenges the limitations of modernist discourse" (Coombe 114).

10 Boddy, here, is referring to Bourdieu's theory of practice which stresses that rather than being determined by a set of rules formulated through social structures and institutions, human behaviour is the result of a series of strategies.

11 The critic is never "outside" her own subjectivity, of course, and here Boddy is likening this role of the critic to the anthropologist conducting participant observation in the field; one can locate oneself so as to be participating within one's subjectivity, yet at the same time be observing its construction and effects, deconstructing its inherent assumptions.

doing to broaden one's horizon, skew hegemonic categories. Here writing is a political act" (128).

Similarly, women in other cultures use their history and language to displace themselves within a subsuming discourse, thereby temporarily, and figuratively, placing themselves outside of it. Boddy, for example, explains that *zar* spirit possession in northern Sudan allows practitioners to alienate themselves from traditional discourse (in part through language), thereby providing "an oblique critique of women's position and the construction of womanhood in village society"¹² (129). This "insubordinate" discourse allows traditional discourse to be viewed from a feminine perspective and therefore *zar* becomes a "vehicle... for the cultivation of an incipient feminist consciousness that seeks... to expose the contradictions in women's lives and open up new ways to think about cultural practice" (130).

This focus of postmodern feminist anthropology on the reformulation of traditional discourse forces ethnographic attention to the location of the anthropological "subject" in relation to the discourse being resisted by a particular cultural practice. By extension, although feminist anthropology articulates a universal male dominance, a postmodern application would explore the ways in which this dominance is differentially applied and, more particularly, differentially resisted by specific cultural groups.

ATHAPASKAN NARRATIVES

One of the inherent problems in the application of feminist theory to anthropological practice is that in order to effect cross-cultural comparisons, it has appeared necessary to employ a theoretical framework that assumes a universal patriarchal domination, even though the concept of the cultural construction of gender is one that does not necessarily obtain in the cultures observed. For example, women in some cultures do not perceive their lives in terms of agonistic gender division and disavow a feminist perspective altogether despite observed behaviour which could be theorized as such by Western feminist anthropologists. A story related by Julie Cruikshank exemplifies this problem. Mrs. Kitty Smith, one of Cruikshank's informants, left her husband and supported herself by trapping, gaining an economic independence that was unusual for Native women in the 1920s. Although younger Native women today

regard her as an early feminist, Mrs. Smith "insists that she was utterly 'old-fashioned' in all her decisions during that period and refers frequently to her deference to maternal uncles, to their wives and to her mother's people" (Cruikshank 1988a, 206).

Similarly, the stories narrated by Athapaskan women also appear to demonstrate a protofeminist independence on the part of female protagonists as can be seen in the following summary of a popular motif in Athapaskan narratives, the "stolen woman."

A man and a woman are killed in a war or feud. Their sons escape but their daughter, secluded in her puberty hut, is captured by two brothers. She deceives her captors by denying that she has any family still living and by rubbing cranberry juice on her legs to remind them of woman's power to spoil men's hunting. She slows them down by refusing to cross a bridge, which would undoubtedly transport her to the "unfamiliar" order of reality. Finally she outwits them and escapes in the middle of the night. By the time her brothers find her, she is safe. (1988a, 210)

Rather than interpreting this as a feminist tale of subversion of male dominance, however, Cruikshank cautions that narrative in oral tradition performs a different role than it does in literate culture. In relating the story of Skookum Jim, the discoverer of Klondike gold, for example, Cruikshank describes how Western versions of this tale tend to glorify Skookum Jim as a picaresque hero in the Horatio Alger vein, whereas Athapaskan versions stress Jim's carrying out of kinship obligations (1992). Oral narrative, then, provides us with a "window on ways the past is constituted and discussed" (1991, 14) in a specific cultural context. Similarly, the cultural context for Athapaskan women's narratives must be taken into account when attempting to interpret the meaning and significance of practices depicted in these stories.

Athapaskan peoples of the late nineteenth century were hunters and fishers who travelled widely in adaptation to the cyclical availability of resources. Their social organization revolved around kinship groups, or moieties, and marriages were exogamous — that is, a member of each moiety, Wolf or Crow, was required to marry someone from the opposite moiety. The Athapaskans were matrilineal; they lived with the woman's family after marriage. Clans, crests and kinship rights and obligations were passed on through the maternal line.

At puberty, a woman was sequestered at the onset of menstruation for a few weeks or up to many months. During this time she was separated from the main camp, wore special clothes and ate special food, and was given instruction in practical skills and knowledge by older women. Women's adult lives revolved around preparing food, clothing and shelter, although, when necessary, women could also perform the male role of providing food.

Cruikshank notes that the journey narratives of Athapaskan peoples conform to the classic plot structure outlined by Joseph Campbell — "a protagonist passes

12 *Zar* "anti-language" takes words with everyday significance and infuses them with new meaning. For example, the word for a woman's husband in the *zar* lexicon is *bowabi* ("doorman"), implying that he is her servant. In addition it refers subtly to three thresholds that he controls: a woman's infibulated vaginal opening; the opening to the womb; and the courtyard door behind which she remains in purdah. But it also refers to a bride's ability to "open her mouth" (engage in sexual intercourse), the threshold between current reality and the afterlife, and the more immediate gateway between trance and non-trance.

from the secular, temporal world to a supernatural, timeless domain, undergoes a unique experience, and ultimately returns to the human community transformed by the event and (ideally) able to bring new knowledge to the community" (1988a, 202). But she also identifies subtle differences between men's and women's narratives that inform the normative concepts of gender construction in Athapaskan society. In accounts which feature a male protagonist, a man "demonstrating human arrogance" offends an animal species; "he subsequently meets an animal in human guise who guides him on a journey to another order of reality where he is spiritually educated. His eventual return to society is complex and difficult.... He returns as the 'power bringer' with new knowledge and the permanent assistance of a spirit helper" (1988a, 203). Women's journey narratives follow much the same pattern but differ from those followed by men with respect to the means of return to ordinary reality. Instead of relying on an animal helper as a man would, the woman uses her "mental energies" to out-think or outwit her captors or relies on "practical reasoning" rather than supernatural assistance. In the story of "The Stolen Woman," for example, the young woman deceives her captors, slows them down and outwits them, but does not rely on a spirit helper to escape her captors. Whereas men's return to the community results in a socialization of knowledge acquired on the journey, women rely on previously shared knowledge acquired during puberty seclusion to effect the return.

Cruikshank notes that the Athapaskan narratives demonstrate three basic structural tensions: between a supernatural and human balance of power; between everyday and supernatural orders of reality (i.e., the two domains of the journey); and ultimately between the kinds of knowledge possessed by men and by women. Cruikshank's thesis is that it is the function of these structural tensions both to explore social contradictions inherent in Athapaskan culture and to provide norms, or an ideal model, for gender relations. In traditional society, this model functioned in a culturally adaptive way — the complementarity of male and female roles in their society allowed Athapaskans to adapt to the extreme sub-Arctic environment. But the model has a function even in contemporary northern society where the traditional practical bent of the women is valued by the white colonizers, whereas the "ethereal" approach of the men makes it more difficult for them to conform to these expectations. For this reason, women rather than men are often consulted on matters of concern to white administrators. The narratives, then, are regarded by these traditional female storytellers as "curriculum," guidance to young Native women growing up in the contemporary North.

CONCLUSIONS

Cruikshank's analysis of Athapaskan women's narratives is not overtly postmodern in its intent; she does not couch her analysis in a postmodern

framework or hotly contest modernist theoretical assumptions. Her work does, however, touch on many of the points raised by postmodern and feminist theorists noted in this paper. Her most recent monograph, *Life Lived Like a Story*, for example, which is a culmination of over 15 years of field work, interweaves the life histories of three female Athapaskan elders with their use of story to exemplify and explain certain points in their personal narrative and with Cruikshank's own comments and analysis, thereby constituting, perhaps, a polyvocal "poetics of ethnography" along the lines James Clifford describes. And she is also aware of the "partial truth" of her research: "These life histories all come from women, and comparable accounts from men would obviously be valuable" (1991, 19).¹³

Cruikshank also capitalizes on a certain "politics of location": her work is not only a collaborative effort to record and publish, at the Athapaskans' request, their personal life histories, but it also entails interpreting these narratives using the Western academic concept of gender models which she finds useful for the purposes of cross-cultural study. It is her belief that these two potentially conflicting discourses of theory and practice can exist simultaneously and can actually inform one another: "The challenge remains one of bridging diverging streams so that locally-based projects can achieve some visibility within anthropology and so that anthropology can provide some ethnographic guidance to groups and individuals documenting ... culture history in the North" (1988b, 34-35).

But it is in the analysis of the function and meaning of narrative in Athapaskan society that Cruikshank's work is most valuable in exemplifying a postmodernist feminist practice. In Bourdieu's terms, narrative becomes a symbolic and meaning-laden strategy for the legitimation and reproduction of social order. Cruikshank's accounting for the persistence of narrative in contemporary Athapaskan society demonstrates that the meaning of traditional narrative is continuously reformulated and that it is generated through its contextual application, both temporally and spatially. Thus the same story can be used in several social contexts to give meaning to certain key events, but it also gains a depth of meaning from the literal context of the narrative itself, from its social applications throughout time, and from its current application in reflecting and symbolically enhancing a shift in gender relations under a global capitalist hegemony.

The application of a postmodern feminism to anthropology, then, can open up

13 Cruikshank notes, however, that despite her efforts to work with men, in Athapaskan society this work is considered more socially appropriate for a male anthropologist. She also notes that "For similar practical reasons male anthropologists working in this area have relied heavily on men to teach them, though they have not considered it necessary to comment on how this might bias their accounts" (1991, 19).

meaning systems and enhance our understanding of the way in which narrative functions as cultural strategy in specific social contexts. As the story of "The Stolen Woman" demonstrates, women are not passive subjects to events or discourses, but possess the agency of "mental energies" to subvert dominance. As I have argued in this paper, the work of postmodern feminist anthropologists is to take up a critical location from which to explore the culturally differentiated nature of these subversive practices.

University of Alberta

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