GLOBALIZATION AND THE FUTURE OF CULTURE AREAS: Melanesianist Anthropology in Transition

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KEY WORDS: comparison, marginality, Melanesia, place

ABSTRACT

In the last decade, anthropology has faced challenges to its self-definition associated both with new worldly circumstances and scholarly trends inside and outside the discipline. Recent interest in globalization has provoked discussion concerning what anthropology should be about, how it might be done, and what its relationships are to other bodies of literature and knowledge practices. Unsettling questions have been raised about working concepts of culture, ethnography, the field, fieldwork, and comparative analysis. Extending the rethinking of “place” in anthropology begun by Appadurai, I consider the future of “culture areas” as discursive frameworks for organizing disciplinary practices. Some characteristics of anthropological regionalism are located by contrasting them to interdisciplinary area studies, insofar as globalization poses apparently similar challenges to each. Because of its iconic disciplinary status as an exemplar of “real” anthropology, Melanesianist ethnography is given extended consideration as a particularly interesting case.

INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, anthropology has faced a series of challenges to its autonomy and self-definition. Among other sources, journals and conferences provide evidence of a growing interest in cross-disciplinary or “postdisciplinary”
orientations such as cultural studies (Hall 1991, Grossberg et al 1992) and various postmodernisms (e.g. Lyotard 1986, Harvey 1989, Jameson 1990). These shifts in attention have been fostered by the pervasive sense that we are witness to a novel historical condition associated with late-twentieth century capitalism: The term globalization refers to this radical intensification of relations between geographically separated places; to a structurally transformative movement of people, things, and ideas across cultural and national borders (e.g. Wolf 1982, Rosaldo 1989, Hannerz 1989, 1996, Kearney 1995).

Both shifting scholarly alliances and an altered sense of the world have provoked discussion concerning what anthropology might be about and how it should be done. Our habitual self-understanding as firsthand observers of the diversely “local” now leaves many anthropologists with a sense of insufficiency: The local appears (only) small-scale, compared with the global, however startling the insights it affords about what is humanly possible, however necessary the commitment it actualizes to take seriously realities marginalized by mainstream EuroAmerican perspectives (Tsing 1993, 1994). Unsettling questions have been raised about the adequacy of our working concepts: culture (e.g. Rosaldo 1989, Gupta & Ferguson 1992), the field (e.g. Gupta & Ferguson 1997b), fieldwork (e.g. Sanjek 1990, Martin 1994), ethnography (e.g. Marcus & Fischer 1986, Clifford 1988, Fox 1991b), and comparative analysis (e.g. Holy 1987, Strathern 1988). The contemporary “world in creolization” (Hannerz 1987)—unbounded transnational flows (whether of labor migrants, refugees, or tourists), globalized markets, media (electronic, televisual), and other public cultural forms moving across national borders and problematizing once salient distinctions between regions and centers/peripheries—all of this appears to demand new scholarly concepts, sites, and methods.

Among our defining, or constitutive, practices, the regional or “culture area” organization of training and research in anthropology has become particularly problematic (e.g. Herzfeld 1984, Fardon 1990, Alvarez 1995). Extending the recent rethinking of “place” in anthropology (e.g. Appadurai 1986, 1988b), I consider culture areas as discursive frameworks for organizing disciplinary practices. The particularity of culture areas is drawn out by comparison with interdisciplinary area studies, themselves recently the objects of serious rethinking.

As culture areas go, Melanesianist anthropology is especially interesting because of its role in the history of the discipline before and after “the ethnographer’s magic” (Stocking 1992).¹ This regional literature has offered

¹The term Melanesia is used here to refer both to a geographical/cultural construct (whether heuristic or naturalized) evident in the ethnographic writings of anthropologists working in the southwestern Pacific and to a disciplinary icon: Melanesia as an exemplar of things anthropological both inside and outside anthropology. It has also become a (necessarily contested) local marker of ethnic/cultural identity (see footnote2).
powerful, contradictory visions of the anthropological project: Melanesian communities have been represented as “islands” of localized variation and microevolutionary development and, in the same breath, in terms of unbounded sociocultural and material relationships with near and distant others (e.g. Mead 1938, Schwartz 1963, Rappaport 1968, Watson 1970). Invoked as exemplars both of the different and of the familiar (e.g. Pospisil 1972, Gregory 1982), Melanesian practices have also long inspired important reflexive arguments about cultural analysis, comparison, and translation (e.g. Mauss 1925, Wagner 1975, Strathern 1988).

Often cited as the foundational scene of “real” anthropology [even by Africanists (Fardon 1990)], Melanesia is complexly implicated in contemporary “postexoticist” (Clifford 1997) discourse concerning the fortunes of the discipline as a whole. Although Melanesianist ethnography may now be resituated, throughout the century-long elaboration of metropolitan academic anthropology, it has in fact been vanguard, paradigm, and anachronism all at the same time (although by no means always and everywhere in the same proportions). This chapter is a gleaning of this literature’s present-day interest. It outlines the impact of contemporary theory on Melanesian studies and, conversely, the particular critical perspective on the world enabled by regional disciplinary commitments.

ANTHROPOLOGICAL REGIONALISM

Regional specialization has been a central component of EuroAmerican anthropological training and practice for much of this century. As Fardon (1990:24) pointed out, its importance is evident in the social organization of the field: its professional associations and journals. Knowing (and being known in) your “place” is important in manuscript, hiring, and tenure evaluations. Although over time their power might wane, disciplinary expectations concerning areal specialization are particularly strong early in individual careers (when most field research gets done).

“Place” in the Background

Nevertheless, only in the last decade have the covertly regional inflections of topical discourses (on, for example, kinship, hierarchy, or historical consciousness) come to be recognized. Appadurai (1986:358) neatly directed attention to the “tendency for places to become showcases for specific issues” and conversely for these issues (or “gatekeeping” ideas) to stand for whole regions—for example, as in the identification of South Asian ethnography with debates about hierarchy (Appadurai 1988a)—even when the concepts derived from parts of those regions or from somewhere else entirely (e.g. Dresch
These homogenizing handles constrain research even as they invite it; carved by our disciplined imaginations from the intricately located experiences we encounter, their graspable, transportable shape makes other possibilities (and their own contingency) hard to hold in mind.

We have also come to recognize how a hierarchy of located topics (or thematized places) has structured research in the discipline as a whole (Herzfeld 1987). The privileging of research in distant, small-scale rural places—particularly insofar as these places were represented as analytically isolatable from trans-local colonial and postcolonial political-economic relations—has been under assault from several directions for some time (e.g. Hymes 1972, Asad 1973, Fabian 1983). We now understand some of the ways in which these locational hierarchies tacitly enacted anthropology’s simultaneously critical and collaborative relationship with colonial and state projects (e.g. cf Said 1978; Stocking 1987) and how they have limited our ability to imagine new venues for anthropological practice (Rosaldo 1989, Gupta & Ferguson 1992, Malkki 1995, Passaro 1997, Weston 1997). These understandings have important implications for Melanesian anthropology given its historically central place in disciplinary hierarchies.

**Culture Areas**

One reason for the revelatory force of critical arguments such as that on the covert operations of “place” (Appadurai 1988b) is that they reframe understandings we have long had but that, over the past 30 years with the rise of interpretive anthropologies and decline of positivist comparativism, we have ignored (see below). Anthropological expertise has never rested on regional specialization. The distinctive internal (mutually constitutive) relationship between ethnographic locations and comparative/theoretical interests such as personhood or ethnicity is a legacy of the culture area discourses that have motivated anthropological regionalism for a good part of this century.

The term culture area originally referred to regions variously demarcated by turn-of-the-century ethnographic schools in the United States and elsewhere. Credited to Wissler (1917) by Kroeber (1939), the culture area approach was originally used, especially in Germany and the United States, as a framework for classifying museum exhibits. Geographic contiguity implied relationship [if not necessarily homogeneity (cf Thomas 1989:27)]: contact, common history, similar environmental conditions. From this perspective, systematic ethnographic surveys and observations within an area promised to yield evidence of trait diffusion and, thereby, to suggest cultural patterning or culture history (as in Wissler’s age-area hypothesis) for anthropologists such as Boas (1896), Kroeber (1939), or Herskovitz (1955) and functional determinacies, cross-cultural typologies, or developmental progressions for anthro-
pologists such as Murdock (1951, 1967) or Sahlins & Service (1960; see also Fox 1991a, Ehrich & Henderson 1968, Winthrop 1991).

The key point is that culture areas were, from the outset, less simply about areas than about culture theories. They operated as heuristic bases for generalization; they organized local ethnographic particulars for theoretical and comparative ends (Ehrich & Henderson 1968:565; cf Winthrop 1991).

If longstanding particularist, functionalist, and neoevolutionary rationales for culture areas have been marginalized in the wake of interpretive and critical styles of anthropology, we still live with versions of the same maps and their associated ethnographic discourses. The relationships of increasing interest to anthropologists now are geographically discontinuous and their contexts cannot usefully be imagined as cultural “islands” (bounded, internally homogeneous, historically stable clusters of traits), nor are they to be found only in certain types of places. Indeed, the range of reference of the term culture has exploded (as it also has outside anthropology) so that it serves poorly as a unit of positivist comparative analysis, although it still serves well in the time-honored Boasian critical fashion (Strathern 1990, Fox 1991a).

Although one might conclude from all this that culture areas are simply relics and ought to be jettisoned, I suggest that anthropological regionalism is more interesting than that judgment allows. The point can best be made by analysis of the historical dynamics of particular regional literatures; however, my interest in culture areas is also founded on general observations. For example, even as culture area constructs tacitly enacted (and often enough directly supported) racial and colonial hierarchies, they were not drawn up to fit national borders and were at odds with (if not actively subversive of) the interests and naturalizing claims of nation-states (unlike area studies; see below). Even while designating the study of certain peoples and topics as more “anthropological” than others, culture area constructs nevertheless motivated and organized systematic consideration of cultural realities marginalized by the urban, metropolitan focus of other disciplines. Finally, in addition to the indisputably local character of classical fieldwork, the discipline has tended to privilege topically focused ethnography with cross-areal (i.e. comparative/theoretical) implications: In anthropology, unlike in economics or politics, theory is mediated by the display of cross-cultural knowledge and, unlike in history or (by and large) literary studies, area specialization for its own sake can become a disability over the course of a career.

**Culture Areas and Area Studies**

Another comparison sharpens the point: The peculiarity of anthropological regionalism is more visible when it is juxtaposed to that of interdisciplinary area studies, with which it has been engaged in practical ways—though more so in some places (like East Asia) than in others (like the Pacific)—especially after...
World War II. Despite this entanglement, culture areas and interdisciplinary area studies face an only apparently similar crisis in the face of globalization.²

The challenge to area studies has recently been explicit and pointed. In the last few years, funding agencies underwriting area-studies programs [not only the Social Science Research Council/American Council of Learned Societies (SSRC/ACLS) but also the National Science Foundation and others (Brenneis 1997)] have been rethinking their support in favor of attention to phenomena that cut across areas.

Post-World War II funding by SSRC/ACLS of area-studies programs was intended to end the parochialism of US social science and humanities scholarship, disciplinarily separated from one another (as well as from scholarly institutions not based in the United States) and substantively focused almost exclusively on EuroAmerican realities (Prewitt 1996c:31–32). The Councils’ post-war funding structures aimed to create or elaborate linkages between various disciplines on the model of multidisciplinary Classics programs that had existed prior to World War II (Rafael 1994). It also aimed to demonstrate the compatibility of “disciplinary” and “area” knowledge (Prewitt 1996b: 34) by setting up conditions meant to further the compatibility.

But the practical demands of the resulting institutional structures—notably language training—created new, regionalized separations. Additionally, because of the organizational subordination of area studies programs to disciplinary departments in universities, area knowledge (not to mention cross-areal comparison) remained peripheral to economics, political science, and sociology.

An index of its recent elevation to the mainstream, globalization is the explicit focus of the mid-1990s’ reworking of the funding strategies of the SSRC/ACLS. According to SSRC Director Kenneth Prewitt, the Councils are pulling back from the committed regional specialisms associated with area studies programs were nurtured by cold war politics, dependent as they were on Title II funding and responsive as their emphases have been to shifting state geopolitical interests. I agree with Gupta & Ferguson (1997a:9) when, referring to university area-studies centers, they assert that “ideas about culture areas in the anthropological literature are refracted, altered, and sometimes undermined by the institutional mechanisms that provide the intellectual legitimacy and financial support for doing fieldwork.” They point out that, as the “institutional mechanisms that define areas, fund research, and support scholarship,” area-studies programs have helped to define where research will be done.

In any case, one wonders how the discipline-wide prestige of Melanesianist research was shaped by the absence of interdisciplinary area-studies funding for research in Melanesia. The lack of area-studies funding may have encouraged Pacific-area scholars when seeking their funding elsewhere to emphasize the theoretical or comparative rationale for their research over its contribution to regional specialist debates. It is possible that extra-regional topical and theoretical debates within anthropology have played a larger role for Pacific-area ethnographers than they have for anthropologists working in those world areas with vigorous area-studies communities and that this emphasis accounts for a measure of the disciplinary prominence Melanesianist and Pacific anthropology has historically enjoyed.
studies, now seen as undermining the study of transnational and other global processes. At the same time, the Councils aim to continue promoting what Pre-witt calls “area-based” knowledge—i.e. knowledge acquired through foreign “field study” in and of particular places but (contra existing area-studies tendencies) this time applied to “processes, trends, and phenomena that transcend any given area” (1996c:31–32). This reorientation is meant to discourage an analytic “globalism” that “floats free of history and place” (Prewitt 1996a:18, 1996c:40).

Anthropologists would appear to be favorably positioned for such research because of the historical legacy of culture-area regionalism (with its contingent and uneven involvement in area-studies programs). Their intertwined commitments both to areas and cross-area topics mean that disciplinary and area knowledge (to use Prewitt’s terms) are integral in anthropology in ways they are not in the other social sciences. Nevertheless, because of the ways in which translocal connections have come to be made in and between culture areas, a significant rethinking is needed for globalization to be incorporated into anthropological practice.

**From Armchair to Open Air Comparativism**

Rarely has anthropological area expertise not been motivated by comparativist projects of one sort or another: whether positivist projects of typologizing for functional and developmental analysis (emphasizing cross-cultural similarities) or interpretive projects, reflexive or otherwise (emphasizing differences). The early prominence of positivist projects—exemplified most elaborately by the Human Relations Area Files and its various products (e.g. Levinson 1991)—is evident in the tendency of mid-century ethnography to typify observed practices rather than to narrate or contextualize events as such (see Clifford 1988, Rosaldo 1989). From the positivist perspective, interpretive projects have seemed anti-comparative for emphasizing the distinctiveness of cultural practices.

In its positivist modes, anthropological comparison was an “armchair” activity. Juxtaposing cultures and their traits within or between culture areas was one of the things we did with our own and other anthropologists’ ethnographic data when we were not doing primary (field) research. But over the last gen-

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3 By no means are the results of positivist comparative work necessarily pernicious or uncritical. They figured prominently, for example, in 1970s’ feminist and structural-Marxist breaks with then-conventional anthropological arguments (e.g. Ortner 1981, Modjeska 1982, Godelier 1986).

4 Insofar as they thereby seek to make evident the cultural particularity of our own interpretive media, interpretive projects are comparative in an enlighteningly reflexive, critical way.

5 An earlier generation sought to do fieldwork in more than one place as an ideal basis for comparative analysis and (as my teachers taught) bulwark against “secondary ethnocentrism.” Although this goal may not be entirely out of fashion, it is surely less feasible than it once might have been.
eration armchair comparison has been gradually displaced from its central position in anthropological debate. The very distinction between ethnography and comparison has itself been eroded by an expansion of what many anthropologists now recognize as ethnographic research sources and objects (e.g. refugees, commodities) that themselves traverse areas.

What has expanded around the furniture has been surprisingly close to the Boasian ideal articulated a century ago (Boas 1896; see also Hannerz 1989, Vincent 1990): a historically informed tracing of the connections among peoples—then conceived as “diffusion” within culture areas (and admitting of exogenous influences, e.g. “acculturation”) and nowadays encompassing trans-regional relationships and referred to by a host of politically charged terms. That is, we have a plethora of significant ethnographic, historical, and textual studies of not only transnational media and identities but also colonial and postcolonial political-economic relationships and representations (Sahlins 1985, Cooper & Stoler 1989, Vincent 1990, Stoler 1991, Comaroff & Comaroff 1991, Fox 1991b, Wilsen & McAllister 1996). Like critical relativism, “open-air” comparativism (that is, inquiry into intercultural entanglements) tends to be viewed by practitioners as a species of the very world-making cultural/political processes it represents rather than (as was the case in positivist projects) a description of them.

Comparison was never a topical specialization in anthropology but one of its defining practices. Therefore, if comparison has largely given way to studies of global processes (in the broad sense above), this is not just a shift in research foci. It means that we have come to a new step in a generation-long transformation of disciplinary means and ends. This step has, as Keaney (1995) put it, entailed a movement away from a “modern world view” of “progressive bipolar time” and its hierarchized “spatial correlate” of centers and peripheries (as in development studies). It has seen the growing persuasiveness of spatially dispersed research open to an eclectic array of sources and the popularity of de-centered accounts of the cultural politics of translocal connections.

**Anthropology in the “Savage Slot”?**

Recent multidisciplinary scholarship has undermined expectations of a coming homogenous “world system” in favor of testifying to a world of proliferating

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6Gupta & Ferguson (1997a:19–22) frame Vincent’s argument about the diffusionist legacy in terms of heterodox alternatives to the canonical Malinowskian functionalist ethnographic style. Perhaps on account of how these things play out in the history of Melanesianist ethnography, I am not convinced the two have not been on a more equal footing all along. For example, even when taking Mead as an exemplar of a post-Boasian turn away from diffusionism and toward the Malinowskian model (Gupta & Ferguson 1997a:21), they cannot avoid footnoting her involvement in acculturation studies (1997a:44). One also wonders where to “place” Malinowski’s own kula travels in this picture.
differences, disjunctures, and inequalities (Comaroff 1996). As research mark-
edly “from somewhere,” anthropological studies have helped to bring this vari-
ously oppressive or liberatory heterogeneity into focus (Appadurai 1990, Appa-
durai & Breckenridge 1988, Hannerz 1996). At the same time, there is a palpable
panic in writings about this subject, as if we are not clear what anthropology, as
such, has to do to remain in the game; as if our own working strategies are un-
critical and clarity is mostly to be found elsewhere. In self-caricaturing panic,
we allow (and actively contribute to) a reduction of what the discipline has been
about to some set of fundamental features rather than owning up to a more
equivocal, historically negotiated dialectic of places, topics, and methods.

Take, for example, the rhetorical agreement by Carrier (1992a:3) that an-
thropology may aptly be identified simply “as one of the disciplines by which
Westerners study non-Western societies.” This may seem an innocuous sim-
plification, but consider the implications. Wallerstein (1996) and Wallerstein
et al (1996) recently published an argument for the reorganization of the social
sciences based on a series of similar disciplinary caricatures. Their unrefer-
enced myth-history begins with the nineteenth century division of social scien-
tific labor in which anthropology took (or got handed) as its subject matter
those parts of the world that were neither “Western” (claimed by sociology,
political science, and economics), “past” (claimed by history), or “civilized”
(claimed by Oriental Studies). In this account, after the post-World War II in-
stitutionalization of area studies, once other disciplines were drawn into the
study of the contemporary non-West, anthropology’s (apparently sole) reason
for being was undermined.7 By these lights, our day is long gone.

It is bad enough when others construct straw men, but it is particularly de-
bilitating when the caricatures are self-inflicted. A whiff of self-caricature can
be detected, for example, in Appadurai’s (1991:194–95) suggestion that an
adequately “cosmopolitan” reenvisioning of anthropological practice requires
that anthropology be situated within cultural studies and that we acknowledge
how the “high ground” in debates about “culture” (in the cultural studies sense
of the “relationship between the word and the world”) “has been seized by
English literature...and literary studies in general.” But the histories of these
fields are no less culturally parochial and complicit with class and imperial
power, their self-knowledge no more refined, than anthropology’s own. Al-

7In all fairness, anthropology is not the only discipline to be caricatured in Wallerstein et al’s
(1996) presentist narrative, which pays scant attention to messy methodological details and is at
odds with nuanced disciplinary histories. The policy-driven aim of their argument is to establish a
rationale for abolishing the separate social sciences, all of which are, in their account, becoming
remarkably sociology-like anyhow. (Indeed, if one follows their story, even the natural and
biological sciences and the humanities appear to be spiraling mothlike toward a vaguely
sociological oblivion.)
though its New Left sensibilities disengage cultural studies from those histories, its blindness to the rural is still worth noting (Ching & Creed 1997).

It is more productive to acknowledge the simultaneous and particular complicities and subversions in anthropological scholarship as in that of other disciplines, and to maintain a wide-angle and historical perspective on the disciplines’ respective types of projects (Vincent 1990, Fox 1991a, Knauf 1994, Gupta & Ferguson 1997a), including their underappreciated methodological complementarities. Our vulnerability to our own doubts and others’ criticisms has been as much a matter of these poorly understood methodological differences (between, for example, fieldnotes, social surveys, historical documentation, and literary analysis, and variants thereof) as of our distinctive topics and places. Consequently, to adopt new topics and places is, by itself, not an adequate response to the demands of shifting disciplinary environments.

Ironically, despite their possibilities, globalization studies in anthropology may be as vulnerable to the stereotyping side of culture-arealization as “Borneo” is to “headhunting.” It teeters on the brink of becoming routinized as the study of essentially unessentializable peoples (migrants, refugees, gypsies) in inherently postmodern spaces (airports, franchise restaurants). Conversely, despite our best efforts (e.g. Weston 1991, M Strathern 1992), topics like “kinship” are stigmatized by virtue of their canonical (therefore, putatively conservative) status, as likewise are out-of-the-way places like Melanesia (Boon 1982, Herzfeld 1987, Tsing 1993).

Indeed, the whole discipline of anthropology is subject to just such a culture area–like reduction. Trouillot (1991) has warned that the reproduction of the idea of the “primitive,” and the identification of anthropology with a “savage slot” (that is, with the practice of reproducing images of a homogenized, Civilization-mirroring Other), is not a matter simply of disciplinary history but also of historically deeper and broader forces (see also Meek 1976, Pagden 1982; cf Kuper 1988).

Without a doubt, anthropology needs to assail being placed in a “savage slot” in this sense; but the question is how best to do this given the diverse ends to which we seek to contribute. I suggest that what Kuper (1988; see also Headland & Reid 1989) calls the “persistence of the primitive” cannot be addressed by marginalizing practices and places within anthropology that have always been invisible in other scholarly precincts. Instead, ideas might be

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8 It is easy to imagine how conventional field research might disrupt this. One can imagine fieldwork in which the experience of those passing through (tourists, scholarly convention-goers) is juxtaposed to that of those for whom such places are not nearly so anonymous, standardized, or given (cashiers, baggage-handlers, flight crews). When it comes to cultural meaning, an anthropological project is at least as much a matter of tracking the heterogeneous reception and reworking (consumption) of images (whether in Fiji or at LAX) as of dissecting their aesthetic or unveiling the interests of their authors/producers.
sought by considering what has in fact been going on in the discipline’s rhetorical birth place and recurrent touchstone.

**ANTHROPOLOGICAL REGIONALISM IN MELANESIA**

The disciplinary viability of anthropology and the fortunes of Melanesian studies come together over charges of exoticism. Insofar as globalization is viewed as a challenge to the field (in both senses), it may be construed as a challenge to whatever anthropologists do, down there, in the southwestern Pacific. The (not strictly academic) image of “Melanesia”—in the figure first of Bronislaw Malinowski (e.g. 1922) and his paradigmatic Trobriands research and then of Margaret Mead (e.g. 1935)—has come to stand for anachronism: field studies of small-scale communities that bracket away historical currents and extra-local influences and that focus literal-mindedly on exotic practices and beliefs of a homogeneous Self-defining Other. But to what degree is this “Melanesia” present in the actualities of Melanesianist anthropology (or, indeed, in Melanesian actualities, as is implied in arguments that our analytical means need now catch up with a worldly reality in which, for example, communities are “no longer” spatially bounded, homogeneous, or historically unaware, implying that they once were so)?

A corollary question might be how Melanesianist anthropology might most productively enact disciplinary self-criticism and redirection. In what ways, in what contexts exactly, has an emphasis on “difference” lost or retained its critical value (compare Boon 1982, Strathern 1988, Appadurai 1990, Comaroff 1996)? Do studies of colonialism, resource exploitation by multinationals, or nationalism in Melanesia necessarily help dislodge disciplinary (not to say regional) stereotypes or will only certain approaches to these topics do? How might studies of mythology or exchange also contribute to this end?

**Globalizing Anthropology in Melanesia**

Contemporary Melanesianist ethnography has been struggling with these questions. Recent works on contemporary Melanesia—only a suggestive, arbitrary, and radically incomplete sampling—have included monographs and collections on the history of Western influences (Carrier 1992b); Melanesian historical experiences and representations of regional and global relationships (White 1991; see also Gewertz & Errington 1990, Schieffelin & Crittenden 1991, and Melanesianist contributions to Lindstrom & White 1990); anticolonial movements and the problematics of cultural “resistence” (Keesing 1992); religion, sexuality, and morality in countercolonial discourses (Kelly 1991); self-making and personhood (Battaglia 1995b); the cultural construction and political economy of contemporary gender interests (Gewertz & Errington 1987); the making of national cultures (Foster 1996b); and the cultural politics
and experience of socioeconomic transformations (Errington & Gewertz 1995). Regionally focused works (Weiner 1988a,b, Lutkehaus et al 1990, Knauf 1993, Biersack 1995) consistently offer theoretically and topically focused arguments that connect local ethnography with discipline-wide concerns about identities, borders, and voices, as well as our representations of these things. Collections with a Pacific-wide focus—e.g. on the impact of missions and colonialism on domestic life (Jolly & MacIntyre 1989), the politics of cultural identities and ethnicity (Linnekin & Poyer 1990), and socioeconomic transformations (Lockwood et al 1993)—contain important Melanesian contributions on, for example, the social upheaval attendant on the destruction of material culture and creation of Christian households (MacIntyre 1989), the crisis of legitimacy of the state (Larcom 1990), and contemporary legacies of colonial “racial” hierarchies (Kaplan 1993, 1995). Other recent work has concerned missions (Huber 1990), language shift and loss (Kulick 1992), media and advertising (Sullivan 1993, Foster 1996a), violence (A Strathern 1992, 1993; Kulick 1993), emergent class interests (Errington & Gewertz 1997), and prostitution and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases (Hammar 1992, 1995; Zimmer-Tamakoshi 1993a,b).

Throughout contemporary Melanesian studies, it is common to find detailed ethnographic descriptions elaborated in relation to equally well-developed theoretical and comparative framings. That the ethnography connects itself explicitly with larger disciplinary and interdisciplinary trends is nothing new, however. Melanesianist anthropology has typically been extroverted (Strathern 1990; also see footnote 2). By and large, these works carry on the regional ethnographic habit of contextualized and layered analysis of extended case materials, now integrating face-to-face fieldwork with a range of new sources and research contexts. They seek out the cultural/historical specificities of novel relationships and discourses, the better to understand the contradictory practice of local cultural innovations and erosions (in addition to the foregoing, see Clark 1993, Hyndman 1994, Weiner 1994, O’Hanlon 1995, Robbins 1995, Sykes 1995). In so doing, they articulate newer (perhaps more accessible) topics with long-standing (harder to translate) concerns. These contextualizations make a world of difference.

This literature also takes to heart the criticisms of ethnographic representation at large in anthropology. As Keesing & Jolly (1992) note, recent work has tended to make explicit the position of the observer and to attend to Melanesianist anthropology has also engaged in a range of textual innovations [going way back (Bateson 1936)]. These have included, for example, intercultural collaborations (Strathern 1979, Kyakas & Weisner 1992), decentered histories of first contact (Schieffelin & Crittenden 1991), contextualized biographies (Keesing 1978), reflections on the use of other anthropologists’ fieldnotes (Weiner 1976, Gewertz & Errington 1987, McDowell 1991, Lutkehaus 1995), not to mention unclassifiable efforts to do as one says (M Strathern 1991).
esian criticism of the anthropological project (e.g. Hau’ofa 1975, Iamo 1992, Waiko 1992). Often critical of the literature to which it is contributing—including its role in reproducing the regional category itself10—recent work is engaged directly in a struggle over the contradictory implications of “exoticism.”

In that struggle, breaks with the past may legitimately be emphasized over continuities. However, the boundary between newer Melanesianist work inspired by a transdisciplinary focus on globalization and older work on colonial and postcolonial transformations and the dilemmas of development is not actually so clear (e.g. Worsley 1957). Melanesian anthropology has also a venerable history of applied socioeconomic research, much of which is accessible only locally [e.g. the Waigani seminar volumes, New Guinea Research Bulletins, Research School of Pacific Studies working papers, and the like (e.g. M Strathern 1975, May & Spriggs 1991, Jenkins 1994)].

A notable intervention at the juncture between scholarly critique and activism, and a frontal assault on the “savage slot,” is the collection by Foerstel & Gilliam (1992). A commentary on marginalizing objectifications and their historical repercussions, not to say fallout, the collection is integrated by its assessment of Mead’s work (rife with objectifications) and its advocacy of a nuclear-free Pacific (made necessary by the political invisibility such representations help to create).

What is extraordinary about this analytically unpretentious collection is its combination of passion and complexity: It makes a challenging model for the critique of anthropology inside and outside Melanesian studies. The editors and their contributors, about half of whom are Melanesian, present an unrestrained diagnosis of Mead’s paternalism together with a feminist appreciation of her attention to sociocultural change and her efforts to popularize anthropology as cultural criticism (e.g. Leacock 1992, Gilliam 1992). In equally complex counterpoint, the collection contrasts the invocation by Waiko (1992) on the value of deeply situated “insider” knowledge to the near-universal, Mead-like position of Melanesianist anthropologists. In this essay, Waiko thoroughly relativizes his own insiderhood (as in his account of how he insisted that his history dissertation be evaluated not only by his Australian university committee but also by his Binandere elders) at the same time as he demonstrates how different (mutually “exotic”) interests and positionings might be negotiated and articulated.

The active efforts of Waiko and Mead to bridge the chasm between scholarship and lay discourses (whether in Binandere conversations or American

10Melanesia (the regional category, its boundaries, and subdivisions) has been critically analyzed in interesting ways recently (e.g. Thomas 1989, Keesing & Jolly 1992, Hays 1993). At the same time, local millennial, anti-, and postcolonial movements have invested that category (along with others like “custom”) with political significance (e.g. Narakobi 1983; see also Keesing & Tonkinson 1982, Keesing 1992, Lawson 1993).
ones) are steps toward a “postexoticist” world: Their work also enables us to consider the riskiness of such dispersed authority. Waiko’s demonstrates the ground to be gained through reflexive engagement whereas Mead’s alerts us to the historically shifting valences of an effective public voice.

**Conventional Provocations**

Melanesianist anthropology has been implicated in heterodox trends since before the beginning, so to speak. Thus, Malinowski’s showmanship may have been key to unseating cultural evolutionism in British social anthropology, but the way had already been cleared for him by Rivers (1914), who converted from evolutionism to diffusionism in the analysis of his own Melanesian field materials (Stocking 1987:321ff, Vincent 1990:121–24). Indeed, if nowadays diffusionism is being reclaimed as precursory to contemporary trends, it has deep roots in Melanesianist ethnography.

Translocal microregionalism is an inescapable ethnographic reality in that part of the world. It is apparent in the work of anthropologists of all theoretical persuasions [and subdisciplinary specialties (Foley 1986, Swadling 1990)]: from Mead (1938), for whom the Arapesh were an “importing culture,” and Schwartz (1963), who described “systems of areal integration”, through numerous studies of trading and exchange systems linking regional populations and village/clan/island communities (e.g. recently Strathern & Sturzenhofer 1994, Biersack 1995), to studies of mythic geographies (e.g. Wagner 1967, Munn 1986, Strathern 1995).

The Melanesian literature on regional relationships is closely tied to ethnographic explorations of indigenous comparative discourses (Lederman 1991a) and relational identities. For example, in studies of cosmology and myth (e.g. Wagner 1967, LeRoy 1985, Weiner 1988a,b), the prominence of themes of movement and both “internal” and “external” difference is striking. The syncretic openness (Glasse 1995) or improvisational inventiveness of indigenous discourses (Wagner 1975) is also evident in anthropological histories of first contact, colonial entanglements, political economic articulations, and gender constructions (e.g. Lederman 1986b, Biersack 1991, Schieffelin & Crittenden 1991, Lutkehaus 1995).

Melanesian cultural styles present a disorienting challenge to ideas about knowledge, power, identity, and sociality. These days, social theory is dominated by arguments, for example, about “the modern,” a term made visible by contrast with “the postmodern.” For all its productivity across disciplines, this polarity helps reproduce “the premodern” (a hodgepodge of the exotic, the rural, the tribal...) as a shadowy, illegitimate, background term, even in anthropology. Melanesianist ethnography presents images that cut across these distinctions (and at the same time force readers to face this otherwise residual
category head-on). Indeed, the regional ethnography had a hard time imagining Melanesian cultures as “premodern,” even when discovery of developmental progressions was fashionable. The ethnographic literature has confronted this conceptual challenge in two (related) ways: through an extreme elaboration of regional comparativism (in the form of endlessly dueling typologies, a cacophony of competing models), and through the pursuit of adequately critical translations (played out in local ethnography but engaging theoretically significant categories).

As far as typology-building goes, rhetorically unstable analogies abound, dismantled sometimes even in the act of construction (Modjeska 1982): For example, local exchange practices and ideas have been called “capitalist” and “entrepreneurial” (Epstein 1968, Pospisil 1972, Finney 1973), or they have looked like capitalism’s opposite and then, inevitably, both and neither (Gregory 1982, Weiner 1992). Nowadays, longstanding descriptions of Melanesians’ apparently iconoclastic, improvisational cultural style of dealing with novelty is looking oddly familiar in yet another way (as an alternative postmodernism perhaps).

Local ethnography has surely succumbed to—even luxuriated in—the comparativist temptations that such analytically decontextualized handles present, such that both their attractiveness and their limitations are painfully evident (Lederman 1991b). However, in the production of new, ill-fitting cases, and in the argumentative reordering of cases to make new typological models and to identify developmental patterns, these efforts set up another, more contextualizing, approach. Always incomplete (looking at individual works), much more satisfactory (looking at the literature as an extended conversation), Melanesian studies have shifted the language of anthropology to ever more critical translations of local discourses.

One example is the ethnography of Highland New Guinea social organization. This literature opened, in the 1950s, already deep in conversation with Africanist anthropology (Barnes 1962, Meggitt 1965, Kelly 1977, Karp 1978, A Strathern 1982a). Initially about the relevance of “African” segmentary lineage models, local ethnography quickly turned to fielding a variety of new images and debating their adequacy in representing what went on in this or that community: “flexible” structures, “loosely structured” societies, “non-groups” (Watson 1970, Keesing 1971). The reworking of anthropological language in an effort to produce adequate representations of Melanesian sociality (not to mention striking contrasts with existing ethnography) has involved detailed contextualization of local terms and practices (Lederman 1986a, Li-Puma 1988) and the coinage of eye-stopping neologisms (e.g. Strathern 1984, Merlan & Rumsey 1991) that shake loose from Durkheimian presuppositions about “society” and collectivity and their constitutive opposite, “the individual” (see especially Wagner 1974, Strathern 1988).
Never simply ethnographic though always elaborately committed to the detailed documentation of cases, to contextualization, and to storytelling, this regional literature poses a challenge to the presuppositions of Western social theory, a disruption to its recurrently naturalized universalisms. To appreciate how it has done this, the literature is best viewed as a whole, dialogically (rather than in terms of individual ethnographies): as a series of challenging engagements with extra-regional social theory, themselves both motivating and motivated by vigorous internal (intra-Melanesianist) debate over terms, functional relations, and interpretations. Viewed in this way, it has achieved its critical effects for the most part not by means of stereotyping (Us/Them) contrasts, but rather by means of progressively more ethnographically nuanced and constrained—therefore less transparent, more difficult—translations (Boon 1982, Asad 1986, M Strathern 1988). Accessibility is lost, surely (as novice readers can testify); but it would be a serious misreading to conclude that the cause is “exoticist” involution. What is gained is precisely the sort of equivalence and respect for coherence suggested in Trouillot’s call for serious attention to diverse (lower-case) others.

The same story could be told about other (necessarily overlapping) topical conversations in the regional literature (on gender, exchange and value, knowledge, and power). The elaboration of critical translation work in Melanesianist ethnography, together with its explicit articulation with transregional social theory, accounts for much of its historical value in the discipline as a whole. And that is why it is still worth the trip (and the reading).

CONCLUSION

The critical literature that frames this brief discussion of Melanesianist ethnography is full of arguments about the future of anthropology generally. As a cautious contribution to disciplinary futurology, I suggest that culture areas will have a modicum of on-going value not as geographical mappings of placed topics but as situated disciplinary discourses. Culture area discourses remain one of the valuable sociable contexts in which anthropological research is accomplished (as the recent formation of new area-based organizations by North Americanists and Europeanists suggests). The layering of perspectives and cross-purposes engendered by different anthropological observers—oriented Janus-like both to Trobrianders or Malaitans (of different sorts, at different times) and to one another (each with only partly overlapping disciplinary and extradisciplinary interests)—makes for a subtlety and depth not achievable by individual works, no matter how dialogic. That is something to acknowledge and to amplify.

Insofar as our work is “re-search” [as Appadurai (1997) offers, using a George Stocking-ism], it presumes “an organized professional community of
criticism”: a “prior citational world,” a specialized community of readers, and conditions favoring “cross-checking”—all perhaps familiar sociology-of-science contexts for the normalization of ideas. But if Melanesian studies is at all typical, culture area work is not necessarily as homogenizing and conservative as this would imply. In these and other regards, we have a lot to learn about the practices of our various culture area communities, including not only their internal dynamics but also their mutual interrelations, and their respective engagements with non-anthropological specialist colleagues and nonspecialist interlocutors (readers, informant-readers, journalistic representers).11 In the wake of disciplinary concern over anthropology’s global positioning, the present, more limited, consideration of Melanesianist anthropology offers some evidence of the critical value of areal commitments when they are engaged, systematically and in diverse ways, with global discourses.

11A deeper comparative understanding of the various areal ethnographies and their mutual relationships (as Africa/Melanesia) or lack thereof—and, consequently, the dialogic elaboration of our various topical interests—would require explorations into their practical infrastructures. We would need to understand not only matters of funding and the pressures and opportunities afforded by related interdisciplinary area studies programs (as mentioned earlier) but also, for example, their respective journals, organizations, newsletters, academic meetings, and other fora of scholarly communication, not to mention the influence (or lack) of key figures (for example, there is no equivalent in Melanesian studies of Levi-Strauss’s influence in Amazonian ethnography). In this context, we also need to explore our teaching practices: largely taken for granted but (anecdotal evidence suggests) likely to be a huge resource for understanding disciplinary trends. An investigation into these matters vis-à-vis Melanesia might (among many other things) include accounts of the Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania and of electronic discussion groups like ASAONET, recently a forum not only for scholarly and practical advice (whether about computers, kava, cultural categories, or class syllabi) but also for political discussion and organizing (around Hagahai genetic property rights, El Niño—related drought conditions and relief, logging, media image, and other issues).
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