



*THE ART OF TACKING:
AN INTERVIEW-DIALOG*
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JAMES CLIFFORD

James Clifford's work has exercised a considerable influence in a wide range of fields, namely through his seminal book on Maurice Leenhardt, *Person and Myth*, and by playing a decisive role in the *Writing Culture* debate, where his approach proved to be central to the "ethnographic turn" not only in anthropology but also in literary studies, provoking a set of enthusiastic, or adverse, but rarely moderate reactions. The essays brought together in *The Predicament of Culture* motivated similar disparate responses and proved again to be a source of inquiry and inspiration for several fields and disciplines. His reflections on culture in his last book *Routes*, namely his concept of "travelling", "diasporic" cultures caused once more enthusiastic adhesion as well as skeptical rejection. The same applies to his contribution to establish closer links between anthropology and cultural studies, and inside these to promote a closer interaction between the more socially oriented, Neo-Marxian British approach and its more textualist US variant. Such contradictory overreactions are very often the result of a too hasty reading of complex texts, which need a cautious, slow deciphering.

James Clifford is Professor at the History of Consciousness Program at the University of California, Santa Cruz and was also founder and co-director of its Center for Cultural Studies, where I resided as a visiting scholar from September 1999 to March 2000.

During my stay I had the opportunity to ask the author himself about his work, his ways of thinking, his "inhabit(ed) antinomies", introducing in the conversation other issues, doubts, reflections and experiences resulting from my California "displacement". And it was also interesting to observe how the author of texts which emphasize heteroglossia and dialog, interacts in discussions and thinks aloud before putting his thoughts into a written form.

When I asked James Clifford if I could interview him for *Etnográfica*, he suggested that in order to avoid a one-sided procedure, we should present rather a dialogic conversation. Accordingly I submitted a set of written questions, which were previously discussed. This was followed by sessions during which the answers were taped and some comments on my part added. Back in Lisbon, I adapted the questions and presentation according to the transcribed answers and my ongoing reflections on the issues addressed. This version was emailed to Santa Cruz, and the reworked answers were emailed back. While doing the final editing in Lisbon and Berlin I decided to maintain the main sequence of the conversation risking some minor repetitions, since it allows one to better capture the associative process that characterizes the interaction.

What follows is a collage of travelling dialogs and juxtaposed, articulated meditations.

Por
MANUELA RIBEIRO SANCHES



MANUELA RIBEIRO SANCHES – *Let me start with certainties and continuities. Rereading your work I became quite aware of recurring themes in it, from your monograph on Maurice Leenhardt, Person and Myth to Routes, themes such as a non-static, non-essentialist concept of culture, the refusal of dichotomies, the attention to local cultures, avoiding at the same time the risk of reifying them in their difference. Your operational, descriptive concept of culture as bricolage, or as collage, seems to be already latent in Person and Myth. In Routes you are still dealing with the tensions between the homogenizing tendencies in an ongoing globalization process and local ways of dealing with them, and you address this continuity quite explicitly, when you write that what you are proposing is “less a bounded topic than a transition from prior work - a process of translating, starting again, continuing”, “prolong[ing] and continu[ing]” (Clifford 1997: 8). Do you agree with this? What has persisted, what has changed or rather been dislocated?*

JAMES CLIFFORD – I might begin by commenting on the point you made about *Routes*, that for me it was a process of translating or starting again, rather than a whole new work, that *Routes* has many filiations with its predecessor *The Predicament of Culture*. When I wrote the passages that you quote there, I had in my mind a work that has been very important for me, but which has been largely forgotten, I think. A work of criticism by Edward Said called *Beginnings*, where he really took on the whole problem of starting up afresh, and shows that it's never possible to begin cleanly, to begin in a whole new way. One is always working with given terms, always working one's way out of certain entanglements into new entanglements. That book *Beginnings* was kind of overwhelmed by the book that followed which was *Orientalism*. It was a

very important book, I think, in terms of the arrival of continental theories, post-structuralist theory in the US. But it came, as always with Said, in a kind of politicized way, although the politics are much less explicit in *Beginnings* than they became in *Orientalism*. Many people think that Said's work somehow begins and ends with *Orientalism*, and that certainly is a great distortion. His idea of the inescapable problem of beginning, and the critique of origins that went with it, has been quite important with me. So in many ways, *Routes* is a kind of continuation, retranslation, or recontextualization of *The Predicament of Culture*. As I think you've said very well, there is this kind of continual worrying of the idea of culture, this sense of culture as a predicament, as something that I'm stuck with, in a way, that's deeply compromised, but that I cannot quite do without. It's a bit like the Derridean idea of something under erasure, this idea of culture, that in *Routes* I begin again with. One of the strands where I think I have changed or moved in a new direction is my more qualified sense of culture as an open process, and as something made or invented. When I was writing *Routes* I would be more likely to use a phrase, like the “invention of culture”, or the “invention of tradition”. Those are references to two works: one by the anthropologist Roy Wagner, the other a famous edited collection by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger. Today I would tend to use the language of articulation rather than the language of invention. I derive the notion articulation, of course, from the British cultural studies tradition and the work of Stuart Hall, reaching back originally to Gramsci. Articulation is the political connecting and disconnecting, the hooking and unhooking of elements – the sense that anything, that any socio-cultural ensemble that presents itself to us as a



whole is actually a set of historical connections and disconnections. A set of elements has been combined to make a cultural body, which is also a process of disconnection, through actively sustained antagonisms. Articulations and disarticulations are constant processes in the making and remaking of cultures.

MRS – *Does it then make any sense to speak of “authentic” or “inauthentic” cultures?*

JC – This way of seeing things seems to me to escape the notion of inauthenticity, which comes with the idea of invented or reinvented cultures and identities. And so, if one thinks of what I studied in some of my first writings on religious conversion, Melanesian peoples converting to Christianity, one has to give up notions of before and after, leaving the old life behind and being reborn in the Christian faith and so forth. I would tend to rethink all that now in terms of articulation, so that in the conversion process elements of tradition get hooked onto elements of modernity and then, as modernity evolves in diverse directions including so-called postmodernity, elements of modernity can get rehooked onto elements of tradition, notions of place, new forms of indigeneity. This avoids the whole either-or, all-or-nothing, zero-sum game of cultural change in a way that, I think, is true to the messiness, the dialogical and historical open-endedness of contact-histories. If I were to write again about the Mashpee Indians – the final chapter of *The Predicament of Culture* – I would take this approach. And in fact I now think an articulation approach was implicit in what I did write, but I didn't have at that time the theoretical language which since then I've learned from neo-Marxian analyses of cultural process and politics.

MRS – *So, cultural change, cultural difference and the way to think about them have kept a central role in your work.*

JC – Yes, my attitude, my ambivalence, if you like, to the concept of culture is not in any sense a dismissal of the concept or a call for its replacement. Marshall Sahlins recently (in the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*) taxed me with wanting to simply replace the concept of culture with that of discourse. But that's a blatant misreading. What I have tried to do is to open up the culture idea a bit, disaggregating it, making it more historical and political.

Articulations: cultures, monsters, cyborgs, marionettes

MRS – *You mentioned, describing your concept of articulation, bodies. Are there any organic elements in these bodies? I was thinking of articulation as a predominantly constructivist concept.*

JC – I think we're on the same track. The word culture is deeply tied up with organic notions of growth, life, death – bodies that persist through time. All the etymologies of the word go back to cultivation. So, what articulation brings to me is a much more historical and political sense of the process of sustaining, making and remaking these forms. When I think of a cultural body as an articulated body, it doesn't look like an organic body. It looks more like a monster, sometimes, or perhaps a cyborg or perhaps a political alliance, a coalition in which certain elements of a population have decided to connect with other elements, but with the possibility – which is always there in articulation – of disarticulation. There is nothing written in nature or in history that this particular group must include who it does, or be allied with that particular



group. Even a time honored kinship system will look more like a set of political alliances than something with the naturalness of an organic body.

MRS – *Could you explain in a more detailed way how the concept of culture as articulation you are now proposing may be a helpful tool to think about the changes we are facing nowadays?*

JC – Articulation for me changes the way one has to think about cultural change. For example, in the Island Pacific area there is a well established way of thinking sometimes called the fatal impact theory or the fatal impact story. It takes as central the arrival of Western societies in Island Pacific cultures bringing their diseases, their religions, their commerce, their imperialisms, all of which have devastating effects on local societies. The rupture is final: fifty years later, all the people are Christians, traditional customs and languages are vanishing etc. We know this story. We read it every week in newspaper stories about remote or primitive places. The assumption is always that, because certain central elements of the culture have been destroyed, killed in effect, the culture itself must be dead. But this is based on the model of an organic body, in which, for example, if your lungs or heart were torn out the effect would be fatal. It's common sense...

MRS – *Yes, you're right. And this is what makes people feel nostalgic about "pure" or "intact" cultures. But don't you think that there are cultures dying out? And isn't there the real danger of the corruption of beliefs, values by the ongoing process of globalization we are witnessing?*

JC – What you're invoking, while true, is only half the story and I'm very suspicious

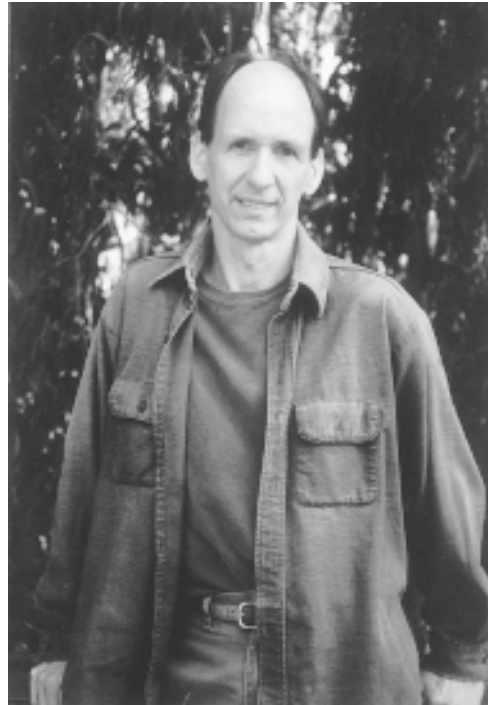
of discourses of "corruption" because they blind us to the revival and persistence of local and indigenous movements all over the world. Many people continue to feel themselves whole and different despite the fatal impact and all the many subsequent changes. They continue to feel themselves Native Pacific Islanders, or Native Americans, or first Nations peoples of Canada. Even though they may not speak their native languages, though they may be good Christians or good businessmen, these groups have built alliances linking elements of the old with the new; and while certain cultural elements have dropped away, others have been added in. So these persisting – not exactly "living" – cultures use prosthetic processes, that is, added or connecting devices more like political alliances than grafted limbs or hybrid growths. Nothing weird or bizarre, then, about Indian Gambling Casinos, or Aboriginal video productions, or Hawaiian reggae, but just the normal activity of cultures, changing and adapting in the contact zones of colonial, post-colonial and neo-colonial situations.

MRS – *Your description of culture as an articulated body reminds me of Kleist's marionettes, those constructed organisms with a center of gravity in each movement, with its tension between the natural and the artificial, the organic and the mechanic. The marionette is thus not to be seen as a system, closed in itself: it opens up to differences, feeds from them without assimilating them.*

JC – That's very interesting, and you're making me remember, in that Kleist story, the claim that precisely because the marionette is artificial, it has a kind of liveliness. The puppet's sense of being animated and real is intensified by the fact of its artificial non-natural quality. I've always connected that story with Roland



Barthes' essay on the Bunraku puppet theatre in Japan, where you're seeing a disaggregated body, as one group of masked puppeteers is moving the limbs of the bodies with rods, and another group stands on the side, intoning, speaking the voice; so the voice and the body are disconnected, but then reconnected in the entire performance, where the power, the evocative power of the body, is multiplied precisely by its being visibly in pieces. That was a text that influenced me a lot, actually. That and Barthes' writings on Brecht – who is doing some of the same disaggregating around bodies, and voices, and realistic settings. I would persist in calling this a kind of realism, radically semiotic and historicist, broken free from naturalism and thus better able to grasp the complicated, uneven, patched together continuities of contemporary cultural life.



James Clifford

MRS – *I might add, too that you reconfigured in Hall's and Gramsci's approach something that was quite explicit in your reading of "ethnographic surrealism". In The Predicament of Culture you write:*

Their (the surrealists') view of culture did not feature conceptions of organic structure, functional integration, wholeness, or historical continuity. Their conception of culture can be called, without undue anachronism, semiotic. Cultural reality was composed of artificial codes, ideological identities, and objects susceptible to inventive recombination and juxtaposition. Lautréamont's umbrella and sewing machine, a violin and a pair of hands slapping the African dirt (Clifford 1988: 131-132).

JC – Yes, but while the critique of colonial codes and hierarchies was there, a notion of cultural politics and interactive process was still undeveloped.

Tacking

MRS – *Notwithstanding the unity I started to mention, there is a complexity in your thought and writing that makes it prone, I think, to all kinds of misunderstandings. We have already mentioned those regarding your apparent dismissal of culture. But you have also been accused of being too reflexive and textual, ignoring the, "real experience" of fieldwork, of de(con)structing the limits between fact and fiction, of exhibiting a too detached observing position (Friedman), of eluding "final definitions" thus risking "inconsistency" or "ambivalence" (Rabinow), and more recently of having too insistently stressed the "moving" element in cultures.*

JC – I could obviously say a lot in a defensive mode about how I've been read by various people, but there's nothing



more boring than an author insisting that he has not been read carefully enough by his critics. So I'll just pick up on a couple of things. I've been accused of a multitude of sins, many of them contradictory, as I offend in one direction and then for a different reader offend in an opposite way. I think this actually gets at an element of my own process, both of thinking and writing. Take that word "ambivalence" in the quotation from Paul Rabinow. Paul is right to point to the ambivalence in my writing. I've actually tried to turn it into a kind of lucid uncertainty, a method. I suppose another way of thinking about that might be to speak of inhabiting tensions – or antinomies, to use that Kantian term – inhabiting antinomies, which are given to us by our time, by the constraints of the historical moments in which we live, and that we cannot simply transcend or step outside of, but have, in some way, to critically and self-consciously, probe and explore. For example, I consider the whole debate of essentialism/anti-essentialism which people in cultural studies go round and round with, to be one such antinomy. The result is often people stuck behind their chosen barricades. My intellectual approach, for what it's worth, is not to resolve the antinomy, to search for some sort of reasonable middle space that I think is true and rational, and then defend it systematically. It's a bit more like a method of tacking, as one might say, in sailing. It's going out to one extreme and back across to another extreme, thus making some headway. I've always taken comfort in William Blake's aphorism: "The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom." So the goal is to see how far you can get with an approach, a metaphor, a theory, see what it opens for you, and then watch it fall apart, as everything at a certain point will fall apart, or turn into its opposite – as Blake, a great dialectician,

would expect. So, I take notions like text or writing and apply them to fieldwork and anthropology, to see what light could be shed, what productive defamiliarizing would result. And then eventually I find myself getting into trouble, discovering that the insight I am gaining from that particular term or theory had produced blindnesses in other areas. Then the challenge is to understand the process, not to dig in and defend a position, but to begin tacking in another direction where eventually the same kind of thing will occur. Now to me, for better or worse, this moving back and forth, going to excess and then going in another direction – which is never an opposite direction, of course, because when you think you're going into reverse you actually end up in a new space – is simply the movement of thought enmeshed in history. It's a process of endless repositioning, never an oscillation, always a kind of open-ended spiral of thought, a way of navigating in onrushing time. I've tried in some respects to make that navigation visible in my work and it's got me into trouble with people who were looking for certain kinds of consistency. They don't recognize my method of juxtaposition. To take an example from *The Predicament of Culture*: a strong textualist approach, the chapter called "On Ethnographic Authority" is placed beside "Power and Dialogue in Ethnography", on the French Africanist Marcel Griaule, in which I talk very explicitly about colonial formations of knowledge. One chapter is more formal, the other more historical; and by putting those next to each other I'm trying to set up a productive space of tension between approaches, both of which I consider necessary. Some readers simply ignore one or the other and praise or criticize me for working one side of the dialectic, while others find only inconsistency or ambivalence. As I said, I



like to think there's method in the ambivalence. (But let's always keep in mind Marcel Granet's marvelous definition of "method:" "*La méthode, c'est le chemin, après qu'on l'a parcouru!*")

MRS – *But these misreadings are to me the more startling as I also realize how self-reflexive, self-explanatory your texts are. I am thinking, for instance, of the role played by the introductions to your books where you provide an integrative reading of the different parts of it. How would you explain the mentioned interpretations, misreadings? How far have they been disappointing, defiant, or inspiring to your work? What have they brought you?*

JC – The way some people have read my work, and that of others like me, is caught up in the current proclivity for what I call "pushing off the posts". There's a minor industry, at least in America and in Britain, of people who are establishing their own discursive identity, their own authoritative position, by saying "we are not postmoderns, not postcolonials, we are not poststructuralists". Beyond many substantial differences of analysis on questions of epistemological relativity, the future of the world system, the salience of "identity" formations, etc. (important debates that do not, in fact, line up along single frontier), a kind of reflex rejection has developed. To some extent this polemical response is part of normal generational and institutional differentiation within intellectual life, the domain of "trends" and "fads." But, I think, it is intensified with respect to the "posts", because of a kind of general anxiety, perhaps of a millennial sort in the last couple of decades, about where in fact the world is going. I do think that the old big stories about where modernity was headed, where the West was going, today seem much less certain. What all those "posts"

refer to is not some sort of rigorous historical notion about where we are. "Post" registers nothing more than the sense of a significant change, something new we don't know what to call yet. So we add "post" to some more familiar thing, marking a line drawn across the flow of time, a moment in which something like an emergent "period" is perceived by people who themselves are complexly and confusedly located in a transition. I think that, given the break up of a sense of teleological direction, intellectuals in the West, and unevenly in other parts of the world, "push off the posts" in the name of something more rigorous, rational, and progressively political, something, in any event, less relativistic, confused, open-ended.

MRS – *Less ambivalent.*

JC – Yes, less ambivalent. And so I think that may have added a certain intensity to the readings and misreadings of my work.

Borders and smugglers

MRS – *Maybe the "intense readings and misreading" we have talked about derive also from the very diverse approaches to your work. I realize people with quite different interests, intellectual formations, and agendas have been reacting to it. There have been responses from anthropology, literary theory, art history, cultural studies. Perhaps they read it differently, put emphasis on different issues, react differently to it. But I also have the impression that you are less and less preoccupied with "textual" readings, the literary critic seems to have gradually yielded to the cultural critic. The issues are very much the same, but I think you are less worried with rhetorical strategies, discourse analysis. You still derive much of your reflections from*



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ethnographies, but I have the impression that the discursive and political practices “outside” (to put it in a sort of reductive way) the actual ethnographies have gained more relevance. What has changed after Writing Culture in the world, in academia, that would explain such a shift?

JC – Well, my work has always moved between the perspectives of literary studies, history and cultural anthropology, and partly as a result of that, I find myself often addressing different audiences, with different expectations. I often function as a kind of import-export specialist between the disciplines. Looked at most cynically, the import-export person in the disciplines takes some idea that’s outmoded in one field and moves it into another field, where it becomes an exciting new thing. A bit like the smuggler, the value of whose merchandise depends on the border it transgresses. More positively, I would say that the movement of ideas from one field into another field is never simply a matter of transporting an object from here to there, but is always really a matter of translation. And through the process of translation in the new context what’s brought across is made new; it takes on new dimensions. I came to professional maturity in a moment of the American academy when literary theory had an enormous prestige. It carried the epistemological authority of people like Barthes and Derrida, and it was getting applied in a lot of extra-literary domains. (I had colleagues in the seventies who complained of “literary critical imperialism!”) I was among those who brought literary theory to bear rather intensely on anthropological writing, especially the various forms of realist writing associated with ethnography, cross-cultural description. At the same time we were involved in expanding what could be called the ethnographic style to a wide

range of contexts and methods for describing, analyzing and evoking cultural phenomena. And, since we had decoupled ethnography from anthropology, ethnography could no longer be restricted to what anthropologists did when they did proper fieldwork. Ethnography turned out to be something that could apply to all sorts of different people interpreting themselves and their communities in “cultural” terms. The notion of ethnography became rather promiscuous. People started finding out that they’d been like the bourgeois gentleman speaking prose all along: they found out they had always been doing ethnography, as insiders/outside in their everyday life, and so there was a kind of drastic expansion of “ethnographic” work. One of the sites into which it expanded was literature and literary studies, but it also moved into film, media studies, museum work, a whole range of fields. Many artists, conceptual artists and otherwise, started doing explicitly ethnographic kinds of installations and analysis. The work of Fred Wilson, Rene Green, Lothar Baumgarten, people like that. So this was a fertile, somewhat anarchic period of crossovers among the fields, among the disciplines, that I associate with the seventies and the early eighties in the United States. It also involved coalescence of many of these trends under the name “Cultural Studies”, a rather different formation from the tradition of cultural studies in England: the Birmingham School’s heyday of the seventies and then its movement into London and the polytechnic universities during the eighties. In the United States the influence of literary studies, in more or less poststructuralist veins, predominated, to the detriment of cultural studies’ updated Gramscian Marxism. The interface with anthropology, something strangely absent



in Britain until recently, was strong, but conducted largely through the expanded “ethnographic” domain. For a time, virtually everything was ethnographic, to a point where the term stopped meaning anything. And there was also a tendency to turn everything into a text, with the result that all sorts of institutional, and material, economic realities and so forth got obscured. Since the mid eighties we’ve seen a process of retrenching and revisionism, a process of recognizing the blindness that came with the insight. My own work has certainly moved in a kind of uneven zigzag since then. It’s not that I think that those movements were useless or that they were distortions; every theory, every interpretative perspective is an intensification that distorts. The question is whether we have begun to get a perspective on the nature of the foreshortening, and may be able to learn not only from what the approach showed us, but also from what it didn’t show.

MRS – *In Europe we tend to think of American campuses as worlds outside the world, ivory towers. Santa Cruz is often quoted as an example. I would also like to add that I was quite surprised by the political engagement in the Center for Cultural Studies. I had the feeling that people were addressing some very important issues, while in Europe, or at least in Portugal, there seems to be an ongoing tendency to the non-political. It is difficult to generalize. On the other hand in Portugal there are discussions about the humanities becoming more competitive. Curricula should be changed in order to attract more students. Some people fear that cultural studies with its interest for media or youth cultures may be co-opted and neutralized, others that it may usurp the terrain of literary studies. Others again react to postcolonial or diasporic studies seeing in them the danger of the dissolution of the canon or a menace to “national integrity” – some*

Europeans even go so far as to consider “identity politics” and its influence outside the US academy as mere “American cultural imperialism”. This to contextualize the discussion. How different is your experience? I guess working in the History of Consciousness Program is a very special situation. And what about the relations between anthropology and cultural studies?

JC – In the US context – at least where I work – the seventies and the eighties saw rather dramatic interdisciplinary work in many fields, particularly in the humanities and the interpretative social sciences. But now we are, as I’ve said, in a period of disciplinary reformation. We find literary theorists saying, for example, wait a minute, we’re not just cultural-studies ethnographers. There’s something to literary analysis that has its own specificity. I see a reconnection with tradition in many fields. But it’s not – even though sometimes it is portrayed that way – a reactionary, “back to basics,” movement. There is no going back. I see a rearticulation, a reformation of the domain of the “literary” in response to the border crossings that have occurred, and that are still going on. We can see a renegotiation of borders around anthropology today, as it draws lines with respect to literary “textualism,” as it distinguishes itself from “cultural studies.” Many want to rethink and reclaim what is specifically anthropological about their disciplinary kind of ethnography – “fieldwork.” Or, if anthropology has a distinctive use of the “culture” idea, what is that distinctive idea? Is there anything left of the notion of Man – capital M – which once united the various sub-disciplines of anthropology? I don’t think there’s anything left myself, but there’s plenty of debate about that today. I think of this as the normal process of what I would call disciplining, which is



something I write about in a couple of chapters in *Routes*, a process of working borders. Borders are never walls that can't be crossed, borders are always lines selectively crossed: there's a simultaneous management of borders and a process of subversive crossing. There are always smugglers, as well as border police. And often the smugglers and the border police depend on each other for their jobs, for the value of what they do. But the permeability, the crossings of borders, need to be renegotiated periodically, and I think that is certainly going on now. A lot of extra-anthropological stuff was taken into the discipline, from literature, from history, from feminism and from cultural studies. And a lot of "cultural" stuff has entered literature and the rest from anthropology. This is all to the good, I think. But then as those intellectual communities begin to lose their sense of identity, of their core tradition, then an aggressive rearticulation of insides and outsides takes place. The current reaction can't last forever, to be sure, since any discipline that builds impregnable walls around itself, like any society, is dooming itself to a kind of museum life. All knowledge is interdisciplinary; knowledge does not naturally fall into disciplinary forms. On the other hand, disciplines, like tools, can be very useful, because you can't explain everything at once. You can't master all methodologies at the same time, and mastery requires specialization. There are good reasons for disciplines, but they need to be seen as historically in motion and relational. I've had the unusual academic fate of being positioned between fields. I was trained in history, always liked literature as much or more than history and had a deepening fascination with anthropology. I've been fortunate enough to work for more than two decades in a program that has wanted me precisely to

juggle the three balls of history, literature and anthropology.

MRS – *Does this mean that working in the History of Consciousness Program has had a decisive influence on your work, or would you say that your interests would have led you anyway to the path you have taken?*

JC – The interests were there, but I'm realistic enough about the disciplinary force of communities to know that if my first job had been in a History Department I would not have written anything like what I in fact wrote. So I feel fortunate to have been in a program where I had, as it were, the permission to cross-over, to mix and match. I had colleagues, particularly Hayden White, who encouraged me to do just this. So I'm a bit of a special case. But I would hasten to say that the kind of work that I've done has been successfully pursued within disciplines by people working the edges of their own communities. It doesn't require utopian spaces like the History of Consciousness Program. It's actually, as I've already suggested, part of the interdisciplinary process of disciplining, a necessary feature of knowledge which waxes and wanes in the social life of ideas. I've spoken a bit about the expanding and contracting of interdisciplinarity over the last twenty-five years or so in the US. But the tempo of these processes varies in different contexts, and what's happening in Europe, Mexico, or Australia may be quite different.

“Hovering off the ground, splendidly rooted by iron feet”

MRS – *Although very sympathetic to indigenous causes, faced with discussions on concrete examples of indigenous claims, I have almost suspected you were becoming an essentialist. My fear of essentialisms results*



from European experiences, such as destructive nationalisms and ethnicisms: Nazi Germany and its celebration of “blood and soil”, Sarajevo and Kosovo, not to speak of a very narrow concept of Portuguese identity cultivated by the dictatorship with its emphasis on tradition and continuity, and significantly associated with the ideology of colonial “universalism”. I am more and more aware how much I too am prey of other forms of localism, as you may be able to derive from my obviously Eurocentric associations.

JC – I suppose, with regard to that question of essentialism and anti-essentialism, I am in tune with writers like Paul Gilroy, trying to articulate an anti-anti essentialist position. The two negatives do not, of course, add up to a positive, and so the anti-anti-essentialist position is not a simple return to essentialism. It recognizes that a rigorously anti-essentialist attitude, with respect to things like identity, culture, tradition, gender, socio-cultural forms of that kind, is not really a position one can sustain in a consistent way. One can’t communicate at all without certain forms of essentialism (universals, linguistic rules and definitions, typifications and even stereotypes). Certainly one can’t sustain a social movement or a community without certain apparently stable criteria for distinguishing us from them. These may be, as I’ve said before, articulated in connections and disconnections, but, as they are expressed and become meaningful to people, they establish accepted truths. Certain key symbols come to define the we against the they; certain core elements of a tradition come to be separated out, venerated, fetishized, defended. This is the normal process, the politics, by which groups form themselves into identities and people recognize each other within a set of symbols and conventions. They do this for better and for worse, and we need to be

able to distinguish the “essentialism” of, say, the East Timorese resisting Indonesian annexation in the name of their peoplehood from Milosovic’s Serbian chauvinism. Epistemology isn’t very helpful here. We need historical specificity and an analysis of social inequality and power. Now, we might in a kind of abstract, purely philosophical way find that all these political and cultural machinations are somehow done in bad faith. But of course just because cultural essentialism had been theoretically refuted doesn’t make it go away.

MRS – *But I found it difficult to understand your apparently too quick empathy with certain issues in indigenous movements, like biologically grounded land claims, or Hawaiian hereditary monarchy and the stress of blood ties. This is one of the reasons why when I was in Santa Cruz universals seemed again important to me. Of course I realize the limits and unsustainability of such abstract essentialisms, even when we admit they are not a mere expression or a strategy of Western hegemony. But I am still suspicious of identity politics as practiced in the United States: don’t they divide too much?*

JC – I don’t think we will get beyond so-called identity politics. And when I contemplate the project of sustaining a rigorous anti-essentialism I sometimes think of the Futurists coming to Paris before World War One – do you recall the photos, all of them buttoned up in dark suits? – decreeing that all representations of the nude should be banned for fifty years! Prescriptive anti-essentialisms are a bit like that. The point really is to develop a critical notion of the various forms of essentialism, when, and where, and how they are deployed. It’s just a bad utopianism, and rather condescending, to think that claims to roots, tradition, identity, and purportedly



natural attachments should be opposed across the board. This is something that has been rudely impressed on the theoretical sophisticates of my own generation. For just at the moment all the rigorous post-structuralisms became popular in the US academy a whole range of formerly marginal and excluded peoples and perspectives were fighting for recognition: women, racial and ethnic minorities, new immigrants. These groups, for the first time entering this public sphere, often felt the sophisticated cultural critics to be, in effect, telling them “Oh yes, we understand your race, culture and identity are important to you, but you know, you’re just essentializing”. Well, the insurgents were not amused, and some bitter polemics around theory and the potentially reactionary effects of rigid anti-essentialisms were a part of the transformations, the struggles, the wars around cultural identity, which have been a fundamental part of life in the post-sixties US academy. In that context, finding ways to take “identity politics” seriously, while also sustaining the possibility of outside critical perspectives with respect to the claims and symbols of these movements is a very difficult, but, I think, extremely important, struggle that various of us have tried to maintain. We have found support from insurgent scholars and activists who are, from their own perspective, critics of essentialism, but often in a less absolute, more historically contingent, more politically engaged way. I think the current conjuncture is one of continuous struggle around essentialist claims both within and outside the various identity struggles. And in that sense the sixties are inescapable elements of the scene. Perhaps from your perspective my own thinking flirts too closely with essentialisms of one sort or another. I find I need to do that in order to stay engaged with the concrete situation I’m in, and not to seek some transcendent

place of philosophical or political purity which would evade the historical conjuncture and its cultural politics.

MRS – *In that sense I think that your way of thinking about culture as articulation is very helpful, as it offers a more complex way to deal with such issues. On the other hand I am reminded of one of your Jardin des Plantes postcards. There you speak of “le vertige horizontal”, “one of those miracles of travel”, of “transplanted civilization” and, quoting Alicia Dujovne Ortiz: “But if I have no roots, why have my roots hurt me so”. And you get “infatuated” with the palms of the Luxembourg gardens “symmetrical, perfect in boxes with iron feet. Vegetable extraterrestrials”. (Clifford 1988: 184-186). I recently visited the Berlin Jewish Museum by Daniel Liebeskind. What impressed me was the way the building proposes an articulation between Jewish culture and the city and how the tension between past and present, light and darkness, and the refusal of right angles and classical symmetry lead us to consider not only the suffering of exile and holocaust, but also the utopian moments of redemption, as suggested in the “Garden of Exile” or the “E. Th. A Hoffman Garden” by the olive trees planted on top of concrete pillars, aerial but rooted, like the palm trees in the Jardin des Plantes.*

JC – Yes, and what’s powerful, too, is the way the concrete pillars are leaning, as if blown by that Benjaminian wind of history. I’m glad you picked up on my little image from the *Jardin des Plantes*, in *The Predicament of Culture*: palm trees in the Luxemburg gardens, wonderfully, perfectly rooted, but in boxes which hover a few inches off the ground and are held up by wrought-iron feet. I guess this is the kind of “rooting” that appeals to me! One wouldn’t want to say those palms really aren’t rooted at all. But the roots hover a bit; they are on legs. I’m interested in all



the roots that are on wheels or carried by jumbo jet airplanes these days. Kwame Anthony Appiah, himself complexly attached to Ghana, Britain and the United States, recently wrote in a memoir of his Ghanaian father about taking your roots with you. I find it good to think with that kind of paradoxical mobile rootedness, because in practice people are living all sorts of tactical combinations of roots and routes, experiences too easily mapped onto oppositions of stasis and displacement, essence and difference, native and cosmopolitan...

MRS – I like your tactical “tacking” and the way you move back and forth between what sometimes seems to me Hegelian dialectics and a very nominalist, pragmatic, ethnographically sustained approach. A nominalist and a cynic who believes in the redemptive moment of small utopias, or in the Messiah, as you once told me, after a discussion on the limits of stoic universals. I must also confess that, faced with the conference held at Santa Cruz “Native Pacific Cultural Studies on the Edge” (Feb. 11-12, 2000), I had to reconsider my anti-essentialist, anti-nationalist rigueur, and my newly rediscovered preference for detached stoic-like universal rationales. It was for me a very strange feeling to hear indigenous Pacific scholars speaking about their culture, their need to find new theories and epistemologies, that might enable them to build their own cultural studies area. And in the process they were invoking things EurAms would hardly venture to speak about on such an occasion, such as long-term friendships and other personal complicities, using affective ties to reinforce institutional and political alliances. These were not projected “natives”, as in some travel accounts I had read, but full subjects on their own terms, fighting for a discipline not only as a pure theoretical, academic matter, but as something intrinsically political. The native Pacific was claiming a complexly traditional and postmodern existence. The fact is that my

Euro-skepticism regarding essentialisms, nationalisms, ethnicisms was somehow tempered by this very warm and very rainy weekend in sunny California. And skepticism, moderated by a restrained utopian enthusiasm, may also be a good way of “tacking”, sailing against the wind. As the history goes, Portuguese were for a while experts in the art of tacking. So, I like the roots and routes. And these may be sea routes. As a Portuguese I have to insist on this. We too like Pacific Islanders are on the edge. Colonizers and colonized, center and periphery, Portugal seems to me, viewed from California, more than from Berlin, a fascinating region to address the sort of questions you have been struggling with. Thinking of Paul Gilroy’s Black Atlantic -and I must stress I am arguing here from a “white” perspective, and it would be interesting to know how “black” immigrants in Portugal, Portuguese Africans, articulate their identity – Portugal defines itself through the sea, for better and worse, discovering and destroying, exploring in both senses of the word. And in Lisbon “enlightened” Portuguese meet everyday the debris of their empire not knowing very well how to deal with the new official Europeanism and the responsibility over its past. Be it as a celebratory discourse on lusofonia – unable to deal with other narratives – be it as a humanist defense of hybridity, another taboo as part of our brandos costumes. But the Atlantic is still a vital part of our identity: for it leads us not only to the West, but also to North Africa and the Mediterranean. I am reminded of what the Portuguese sociologists Boaventura de Sousa Santos says about the complex Portuguese identity, and our present reluctance to accept as integral parts of it, the African, Asian elements, hastening to be euro-progressive, globally oriented (post-)moderns.

Writings

MRS – I have mentioned your “Postcards from Paris”. Besides this text “White Ethnicity”,



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*“Immigrant”, “Fort Ross Meditation” are what I would call examples of a more openly “experimental”, “literary”, “subjective” writing. What you call “personal explorations” seem to me to comment on your more “academic” texts. How do these two types of discourse relate to each other? Do they fit together? (I know the question is sloppy but useful). And then there are people who prefer your more scholarly writing in *Person and Myth* although I must say it can be quite unorthodox too.*

JC – You ask about the different styles and modes of writing that I use, and my sense of what the relation is between the literary and the scholarly, the poetic and the prosaic, etc. And you suggest that some people prefer my more scholarly writing in *Person and Myth*. Well, in that biography the writing isn’t uniformly conventional – there are a few, we might say, experimental turns – but there is a continuous object, a life, and a more or less continuous, descriptive, analytic/evocative tone sustained throughout. No doubt this makes it more acceptable to some readers. While I do try to problematize the idea of a continuous life and of a biography, I don’t do it in the form of the book itself for tactical reasons that I explain in my introduction. But since then I’ve allowed myself to experiment with more than one style within the covers of a single book. There I’m self-consciously pushing against the law of genre – that contract between reader and audience which determines the mode of reception, the rhetoric, the rules of evidence and argument and so forth – within particular forms of writing. And to be quite honest, I’m not sure ultimately just why I do this. It’s not that I think “scholarly genres” are restrictive and must be transgressed, or that “poetic” evocation is liberating. But perhaps I’m not unique in finding that my process of “thinking

through” a topic – whether it is the problematic of culture, in *The Predicament of Culture*, whether it’s contemporary travel and displacement in the sequel *Routes* – takes place in a number of registers. Some of these are scholarly and analytical, some of them evocative or poetic. And I think that, at least for me, whatever sense of complexity and richness I can derive in the hermeneutic process, has to do with crossing among these several registers. Don’t we all operate on more than one level of consciousness and desire? Gaston Bachelard wrote somewhere that you can’t really know a topic until you’ve dreamed it. And wasn’t it Apollinaire who put a sign outside his door, when he was sleeping during the day: “*Le poète travaille*”? And why not the sleeping scholar, the scholar at work: “*Le savant travaille*”? I’ve wanted to open up a bit the range of processes that go into what we consider to be thought, and even methodical research: some of it very orderly and disciplined, some of it much more free-flowing and open-ended, and in a sense meditative. I like the notion of meditation, a more inclusive word for the real range of processes involved. But why is it that when we come to write about what we’ve been thinking, meditating, dreaming, researching, we have to foreshorten a multifarious process into a single rhetoric, one overarching form? For better or worse, I’ve always found that focus to be constraining. So I’ve tended to write in a number of styles and to produce books that look like collages or juxtapositions of genres. My goal hasn’t been to blend the different styles, not to say that academic writing really should be poetry or anything like that. It’s not about blurring, it’s about juxtaposing, and thus making people conscious of the rules of engagement, as it were, determining their reception. So I make demands on my



readers, I ask them to shift gears. I was doing some of that in *The Predicament of Culture* and I've done rather more in *Routes*. Some of the book's "chapters" really look a lot like poems; some are travel accounts; one is an evocative little book review; and a number are rather developed scholarly arguments with lots of footnotes and so forth. The final chapter, "Fort Ross Meditation," is written in a rather personal scholarly voice – trying to exemplify the form of the meditation for serious historical-cultural analysis. So as the book's readers turn to each new chapter, they have to rather quickly get a take, a read, on what sort of a form is coming at them. Some readers feel that this isn't quite fair and they work to separate the wheat from the chaff. One reviewer of *Routes* will like half of the pieces and dislike the other half, and then another reviewer will have exactly the opposite reaction. That may be inevitable, given the diversity of styles and forms in that book. Of course, there's plenty of room for criticism of these experiments, and I'm the last to know how successful I've been.

MRS – *Have you ever have been tempted to publish other more "fictional truths"?*

JC – I suppose I could have separated things out, collecting all the academic essays in one book and then writing a separate book of poetry, or a book of travel essays... But for better or worse it has seemed to me more interesting to make hybrid books and not to let things fall too easily into ready-made categories.

("Post")modernisms

MRS – *In the Prologue to your last book *Routes* you describe it very self-reflexively as a "collage" (Clifford 1997: 11), as "paths and not a map", "bring[ing] parts together while*

sustaining a tension between them" (Clifford 1997: 10). *(This reminds me very much of Benjamin's concept of constellation). Your models are modernists and surrealists but your work has been labelled postmodern. I am aware of hesitations concerning the modernism and postmodernism in your work. You describe yourself ironically as a "a sometime postmodern (liking) contamination" (Clifford 1997; 231); and there is a direct grappling with the issue in "Paradise" when you ask if your "concern and (taste) for cultural/historic juxtapositions [is] part of an 'englobing appetite', a 'hegemonic', 'postmodern irony'"; and whether your work really helped establish a new "intellectual imperialism" (Clifford 1997: 180). Going back to the surrealists. You mention that your interest in "cultural collage and incongruity derives quite explicitly from modernist art and poetry: the Cubists, Dada and international Surrealism, Segalen, Conrad, Leiris, Williams, and Césaire" (Clifford 1997: 180), to whom you actually dedicated insightful essays in *The Predicament of Culture*.*

JC – I have never been comfortable with the label postmodern, postmodernist, as attached to my work, and I think if people read *The Predicament of Culture* they'll see that I almost never use the term. On the other hand, since so many have insisted on calling me a postmodernist, I have to accept that there must be something to it. But my own view is that the line between postmodernist and modernist is always going to be fuzzy and debatable. I said before that the very notion of "post" can never adequately describe some whole new perspective or epoch but merely a sense of change or something "after," still entangled in what we know and can name. I certainly think of my writing as caught up with and empowered by modernism. You mentioned the surrealists, Conrad, Leiris, Williams, Césaire, people like that; and that's certainly the way I would locate myself. Now taking a figure like William Carlos



Williams, one could produce a reading that would make him a postmodernist avant la lettre. And there may be a sense in which my use of him, my updating, does something like that. He's of course a different kind of modernist, unlike the canonical figures Joyce, Picasso, etc., who are very much associated with the great Western centers, such as New York or Paris. Williams is more decentered. He makes a self-conscious move to the local – a local that is not outside of connection with the larger circuits of power, of literary and cultural influence, but which is a kind of strategic marginalization. I'm referring, of course, to Williams' famous choice to locate himself in New Jersey, not far from New York to be sure, but definitely in a small town, adopting there the specific, quasi-ethnographic, standpoint of a family doctor. And this was a time when doctors went into people's houses, so he derives an acute sense of a localism – of accent, of body types, of ethnicities – in the immigrant, working-class communities of New Jersey. Now, there's something for me very attractive about adopting that engaged, hands-on, perspective. So Williams is perhaps someone who prefigures an expansive vision of the "ethnographic," a vision located not primarily in London, Paris, New York, Vienna, Berlin, where modernist culture was elaborated, but which interests itself in out-of-the-way places. When I speak like that, it starts to sound like the language of certain "postmodernisms," no? But it's important to say that Williams is not a nomad, is not displaced in that normative poststructuralist sense which sometimes turns the observation that people are multiply positioned and displaced in the contemporary world into a prescription that they should be multiply positioned and displaced. Williams understood the fact of multiple location and positioning and consciously chose to localize himself. I

suppose he is analogous to those palms in their boxes: he sinks roots, he localizes himself, strategically. Rutherford, New Jersey is not the place he was born; he has a very complex multinational familial background. Williams puts down artificial roots, but in a lifelong way, tied to an engaged practice and involvement with neighborhoods, people, their bodies. This simultaneously intimate and analytic medial practice produces a set of writings which go well beyond poetry, narrowly defined. And, once again, this is not some sort of definitive return to the local. I see it as the construction of a local/global place. While Williams writes his epic "Paterson" from the standpoint of a fading industrial city, he stays in contact with the most "advanced" art and literary scene in New York. And he knows quite well what's happening in Paris. These high modernist places are simply parts of his world, not its center. It's that sense of off-centered connectedness that I have found so interesting, in my foreshortened reading from the late twentieth century. The exercise may, at least, give a sense of the sort of anachronistic, aprogressive postmodernist I am – if I am a postmodernist.

Identity in Mashpee

MRS – *You have mentioned "Identity in Mashpee" and the importance of that trial for your further thinking. Could you elaborate?*

JC – Well, the essay about the Mashpee trial has played a central role in the development of my thinking, actually perhaps more important than is immediately apparent. In a Boston federal court in 1978 a group of Indians on Cape Cod had to prove that they were a tribe in order to have status to sue for land. I sat in on this trial, more or less by chance, and became very engrossed. I saw all the



concepts I had been studying historically – the notions of culture, of history and of historical continuity, identity and so forth – being efficiently torn apart by lawyers. And I saw a very complicated and apparently discontinuous history of Native American peoples in New England being put together and pulled apart by the various discourses in the courtroom. I attended the proceedings and kept extensive notes. I actually gave a talk based on the trial very soon afterwards, and then I put it aside for seven years or so. I wasn't sure I really had the authority, as a mere observer in the courtroom, to write about this history. But I eventually decided I could write it up, since it would appear at the end of my book *The Predicament of Culture*, and would be obviously tied in with all the themes in the book. I hoped it would be evident that I was not giving a definitive or complete picture of the trial or the history of the Indian peoples in Mashpee or New England, but that I was in fact reading this event through my own obsessions, my own interests. People have, of course, criticized me for giving definitive versions of Mashpee and the trial, even though in the essay I finally wrote I tried to position myself carefully in the observer's seats of the courtroom. I didn't, in other words, try to adopt a position either of omniscience or of mobile authority. I tried to maintain a clear, partial perspective. In retrospect I see that I was using the very difficult and in many ways still enigmatic history revealed and obscured at the trial, I was using this paradigm, if you like, as a kind of transition in my own work. The trial pushed me beyond my early focus on the history of European anthropology and exoticism, with a particular emphasis on textual forms of critique. And it led me into a concern with the possibilities and limits of indigenous agency, dynamism, and self-representation. The next essay that I wrote after the Mashpee text, an essay

republished in *Routes*, was about "Four Northwest Coast Museums", of which two were tribal museums. There I was preoccupied with the processes by which indigenous communities on Vancouver Island in Canada – Kwagiulth (formerly Kwakiutl) – reappropriated the institution of the museum. Founding a museum was a condition for the repatriation of artifacts from the national collections in Canada. In the process the native communities transformed a dominant Western institution for the purposes of telling an anti-colonial tribal history. They also combined the functions of display and use, for cultural outsiders and insiders. This resourcefulness recalled the complex way the Mashpee had survived over several centuries of brutal war and intense pressures to acculturate in New England. I saw how foreign institutions such as the tribe, or the museum, externally imposed institutions, were being made and remade, translated for indigenous use. And that theme became a dominant issue in my thinking. So in some ways I'm still trying to figure out the Mashpee case, the improbable, possible persistence of Native peoples in New England. The very complex processes of tribal continuity, in colonial situations of great violence and relentless pressure, have preoccupied me. And I've come to think that the contemporary emergence of indigenous politics and contestations into new and larger, articulated public spheres is one of the really important developments of the late twentieth century.

Cultural studies and diasporic theorizing

MRS – *This reminds me of the importance of thinking about the local in ways that may pay due attention to the ongoing changes in our contemporary interconnected world. How can a transnational critical cultural studies articulate the local and the global? How can we think of ways of surpassing, while maintaining, our local*



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ways of speaking, writing, teaching, developing at the same time ways of communicating and research strategies that may allow smaller communities/countries to participate more adequately and visibly in the “global discussion”? In Portugal, where we are very much aware of such dependencies and possibilities, we are, I think, very interested in such strategies.

JC – That’s a very large set of issues. I’ve been focusing on what I call articulated sites of indigeneity, particularly in the Pacific – returning in some of my recent work to the Southwest Pacific, Melanesia, where my first book was centered. I see this as working toward a historically rich, non-reductive account of transnational cultural politics. The strand of analysis I’m extending developed through a critique of notions of “ideology” in late capitalist situations, a critique stemming from the moment of the New Left in Britain. After 1960 people like Raymond Williams, E. P. Thompson, and Stuart Hall grappled with the fact that the old economic models and trade union politics were simply not dealing with facts like the Americanization of Britain, new patterns of consumption, religion, youth cultures, race and gender, a whole range of things that couldn’t be

rounded up in an older class-based view of the political. The cultural studies movement successfully demonstrated the relative autonomy of cultural politics from economic determinations, and thus it opened a breach in modernizing, Euro-centered teleologies. But it was still very much centered in Britain, in a small range of “advanced” capitalist situations. In the past couple of decades, however, we have seen the emergence of diasporic theorizing, the recognition of Caribbean and South Asian histories and spaces within Britain, and then the travelling of cultural studies itself into places like Australia, New Zealand and the US. We are starting to see the cultural politics of late capitalism, articulated with local places and histories all over the globe, analyzed in ways which avoid economic reductions and avoid top-down, system-centered visions of the planet. The challenge is to see the world whole – or whole enough – while leaving room for the kinds of dialectical and ambivalent histories and outcomes I’ve been trying to articulate in this interview.

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