
Articulated Meanings: Studies in Gender and the Politics of Culture—Introduction

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Rather than assume we understand, we search for meaning and for the context of its construction.

— Couillard, 1996: 71

Over the past decade, the politics of culture has emerged as one of the most prominent fields of interest within social anthropology, embracing such issues as the politics of representation and self-representation (Conklin, 1997), cultural production and the politics of meaning (Williams, 1991), identity politics (Aretxaga, 1997; Handler, 1988), cultural authenticity (Kapac, 1998; Linnekin, 1992) and the invention of tradition (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983; Wagner, 1981). Its rise in prominence has paralleled anthropology's retheorizing of the culture concept, a rethinking prompted in part by criticism of ethnography's focus on the homogeneous, ahistorical and undifferentiated aspects of cultures to the neglect of their "contested, temporal and emergent" (Clifford, 1986: 19) dimensions. This neglect has resulted, some have argued, in the construction of "dangerous fictions" (Abu-Lughod, 1993: 3): representations of cultures as bounded, timeless, unified entities, a view which has effected the "erasure" of both "time and conflict" (1993: 9) from certain ethnographic understandings.

This theoretical reflection in anthropology has coincided with an expanding discourse on culture and power within the social sciences, a discourse that is evident in the work of Raymond Williams (1983), Pierre Bourdieu (1977) and most recently Eric Wolf (1999), in writings on hegemony, and in the nascent field of cultural studies.¹ Central to this discourse is the argument that culture, particularly in complex societies, is not simply a given; but rather it is a process and in some cases a political resource—a shifting nexus of meanings whose control may be central to the continuance of any group's "claims to power over society" (Wolf, 1999: 290). A rising interest in minority/subaltern studies (of which feminist anthro-

poloogy has been a part) and a growing concern for the unempowered—those who may not “subscribe” to dominant views of culture—has led to recognition that the production, representation and valorization—or alternately contestation—of culture involves deeply political processes, and that access to the forums wherein dominant culture is formulated varies with one’s social status.

While much research into cultural production has proceeded at the community level (be it ethnic, indigenous or national), the papers in this volume examine these issues as they relate to gender.² The cultural construction of gender has been a central issue in feminist anthropology since Ortner and Whitehead (1981) argued for a greater appreciation of how social meanings with respect to gender and sexuality vary cross-culturally. What has changed in feminist anthropology since their important volume appeared, however, is that culture has been problematized: not content to take culture or culturally defined notions of gender as a given, we want to understand how certain definitions of genders and gender roles have come about. How and by whom have these cultural constructions been negotiated or formulated? What degree of unanimity exists? What differences are there within gender groups that are internally differentiated by class, age, ethnicity or race, and how might gender constructs be contested within socially diverse societies? In short, is there a dynamic to be understood in the social construction of gender that can be appreciated through a “feminist cultural analysis” (Yanagisako and Delaney, 1995: 14)?

For feminist anthropologists, a heightened awareness of the politics of cultural production has long been tied to a recognition that what we do as ethnographers—the recording of cultures and gender as part of those cultures—has engaged us epistemologically in a politics of representation: insisting on understandings of other cultures that are accurate and inclusive with respect to women. As Diane Bell (1992: 30) has explained regarding her position as a feminist ethnographer, “. . . it is worth talking to women about their lives. Woman’s knowledge I take to be grounded in her experience, practice, feeling, thinking and being. By privileging woman as knower, man is ethnographically decentred, and this is a profoundly political act.”³ Within this context, what then is feminist anthropology if not a politics of culture?⁴

The questions raised by the problematization of culture with respect to gender allow us to explore how various social factors intersect in the negotiation and portrayal of culture and collective identity and, at the intra-cultural level, how identity and perspective within

gender groups vary as members are positioned differently within society. In these articles, we similarly examine issues relating to the construction and contestation of meaning, and this concern becomes the lens through which we explore the relationship between gender, culture and anthropology. Some of the specific issues regarding gender and the politics of culture that we address in these articles include: what social or political forums are involved in struggles over constructions of truth and value that dictate gender ideals and roles? How are notions of tradition employed as symbols of cultural meaning in debates regarding gender? What role do women as a status group play in cultural production, either as consumers of certain versions of reality or generators of alternative models? How are women implicated in activities that construct, naturalize or reproduce dominant ideologies or conversely engaged in struggles that contest and resist these? And finally, how are Western feminist anthropologists multiply engaged in local and Western discourses regarding gender and cultural politics?

The articles contributed to this volume speak to each other in varying ways. The papers by Petra Rethmann and Anne Meneley explore how various discourses of dominance with respect to gender intersect with racial, ethnic and class distinctions to form complex ideologies of identity and stratification. Claudie Gosselin’s analysis of the politics of global feminist understandings and local Malian meanings attached to female circumcision intersects with Meneley’s examination of local meanings of this practice as it relates to gender and status in the Middle East. And narrative and engendered subjectivity is treated in both Rethmann’s and my (Aucoin’s) articles: Rethmann explores subjectivity on an individual level, through the medium of one Koriak woman’s life story, while I discuss collective subjectivity as it is formulated and contested through the medium of women’s myths in Fiji. In all of these articles, we attempt to articulate the cultural meanings of gender and gender practices in various ethnographic contexts while illustrating how gender articulates with other facets of women’s identities.

In my analysis of myths circulated among women in western Fiji, I explore the potential of myth as a forum for the contestation of hegemonic constructions of gender and status. Through their myths, women engage in a symbolic politics that transforms signs of male domination into their opposite: male supernatural figures are depicted as powerless; an order of space that privileges men is inverted; and, a system of knowledge that excludes women is challenged. By contravening prevail-

ing meanings, these myths challenge the symbolic dominance of men within this society's order of gender, space and knowledge. In so doing, myths form part of a larger insubordinate discourse through which women debunk reigning constructions of truth regarding gender. In this context, myth represents a medium through which a politics of representation is played out between women and men.

For the Koriak of Kamchatka, a group of recently settled reindeer herders, Rethmann explains how dominant Russian categories of race and a "rhetoric of primitivity" pit pejorative notions of "wildness and ignorance" against Russian self-conceptions of superiority and modernity. These notions for Koriak women are coupled with a Russian-centred gender hierarchy that embraces ideals of femininity, domesticity and morality. Responses to discrimination are traced by Rethmann in her sympathetic account of the life of one Koriak woman who, while struggling against condemnation and poverty, nonetheless attempts to construct a more positive self-identity.

In order to better understand the cultural politics underlying recent politically charged debates over female circumcision, Claudie Gosselin analyzes the various cultural meanings that these practices carry for Western feminists, anthropologists and local practitioners in Mali, West Africa. As she explains, international debates between Western and non-Western commentators have set cultural rights against human rights, Western feminism against anti-colonialism, cultural relativism against ethnocentrism and modernization and medicalization against tradition. Her research into factors contributing to the failure of campaigns for the eradication of this practice in Mali reveals that local positions for or against this practice, although seemingly similar to those held in the West, may be founded upon altogether different political and religious premises. The maelstrom of meanings surrounding these practices serves to remind us that global homogeneity for women in terms of both gender identity and a shared understanding of bodies as sites of cultural practice cannot always be assumed.

Anne Meneley's article examines the character of class and gender hierarchies among Muslim women in Zabid, Republic of Yemen. Among these women, hegemonic ideals concerning "appropriate behaviour, piety, morality and personhood" form the basis of a system of distinction that separates elite women from women of the servant class, the *akhdam*. In this politics of propriety and emotion, the "moral superiority" of the elite is used to legitimize status differences between these women. Differences in styles of consumption reinforce ideological distinctions as well for, through their access

to surplus wealth, elite women are able to engage in competitive cycles of sociability and recognition that establish and maintain reputations relative to other members of the elite and that clearly exclude servant women. In complex societies such as this, where gender categories cross-cut different social strata, Meneley argues for a deeper understanding of how women may be controlled by dominant gender ideologies while simultaneously being implicated in their construction.

While addressing the theme of gender and culture through our work, we strive to reinvigorate some of the timeless concerns of social anthropology by rethinking some of its fundamental fields of interest: myth, conflict and dispute, gender hierarchy, narrative, the politics of meaning, the anthropology of the body, and personhood and the politics of emotion. Simultaneously, however, we also address current social issues such as identity politics, cultural relativism and human rights, race, class and gender, body politics and resistance to dominant ideologies of gender. It is hoped that the issues raised by this collection will establish gender as a key factor to be accounted for in studies of cultural politics in anthropology.

Notes

- 1 The field of cultural studies has focussed primarily on class-based societies, and within these, on culture as it is experienced by those who are not economically privileged or of the social or political elite (ethnic, racial or social subcultures, women, gays, youth, the working class). See especially de Certeau (1988), Hall and Jefferson (1976), Stanley (1990), Stallybrass and White (1986), Willis (1977). During (1993) and Hebdige (1979) provide overviews of contributions to this field.
- 2 Papers contributed to this volume by Anne Meneley, Petra Rethmann and Pauline Aucoin have developed out of the colloquium "Gender, Sexuality and the Politics of Culture" organized for the 1998 Canadian Anthropology Society Annual Meetings held in Toronto, Ontario. We thank Richard Lee for graciously accommodating our session, and are grateful to Micaela di Leonardo for the suggestions and comments on these papers she provided at this time as discussant for this session. I also thank Glynis George for discussions of this topic as it relates to feminist anthropology.
- 3 See also Dorothy Smith (1990) on feminist sociology.
- 4 This comes with a caution against the construction of "women's cultures" that engage in a cultural essentialism differing little from that employed elsewhere (di Leonardo, 1991).

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