

## Postmodernism

ANTH 348/Ideas of Culture

## Postmodernism

Basic features:

1. Challenge to ethnographic authority.
2. Dialogical & polyvocal approaches: giving voice to others.
3. Ethnography as literary text: it is "fictional" in sense of being created, fabricated. By whom?
4. Focus on interpretation and meaning rather than causality & explanation.
5. Trend away from grand theory & generalization toward the particular and unique.
6. Renewed emphasis on relativism.
7. Author saturated, rather than data saturated, ethnography.
8. Postmodernism as an empirical entity – changes in academia parallel changes in real world, e.g., political/cultural fragmentation.

*Anthropology: A Student's Guide to Theory and Method*, University of Toronto Press.

## Postmodernism

- Modernist anthropology (i.e. everything up to 1970s) was associated with detachment, assumption of scientific neutrality, rationalism.
- Postmodernists assert that *objective, neutral knowledge of another culture is impossible*.
- Show a strong concern with *hermeneutics* – study of interpretation of meanings.
- Reject view that observers derive neutral & objective knowledge of world.
- Humans cannot have knowledge of world that is not tinged with bias from a particular perspective.
- *Knowledge is conditioned by culture, context, & history*.

## Postmodernism

- Impossible to interpret world in a truly detached, objective manner.
- Everyone interprets world based on their language, cultural background, and personal experiences.
- Postmodernists critique *process of ethnographic description, especially assumption of the neutral omniscient (all-knowing) observer ethnographer*.
- Anthropologists work with selected informants, many of whom tend to be marginal people.
- They then generalize to entire cultures & societies.
- To a post-modernist this is very problematic.

## Postmodernism

- Recounting field experiences becomes a narrative device by which anthropological understanding is conveyed
  - e.g., Rosaldo's loss of his wife was key to his understanding grief of Ilongot headhunters.
- The data themselves are mute, but *anthropologists construct meaning* by writing ethnographies.
- Because writing follows certain literary conventions (tense, voice, etc.) the act of writing is a literary construction of writer.
- Readers, in turn, impose their own interpretation on author's text.
- Writing & reading of ethnographic texts involves *piling of layer upon layer of interpretation*.
- Does this sound like Geertz to you?



## Postmodernism

- Acceptance of an interpretation is ultimately an issue of power & wealth.
- Historically, interpretations voiced by white, European males in industrialized nations have de-licensed & silenced all others
  - e.g., women, minorities, indigenous peoples, the poor.
- M&W suggest postmodernism be seen as part of continuing dialectic between scientific & humanistic approaches.
- It is *not the end of anthropology*
  - Simply part of field's continuing history.
  - Offers valuable insights into methods of analysis used.
- Conflict between postmodernists & adherents of a scientific anthropology stems from differing opinions about purpose of anthropology.
- *If we agree that goal of anthropology is to describe & explain human affairs & teach reader the subjective meaning of human experience, then scientific & post-modern goals of anthropology are complementary.*

## Postmodernism

- Conflict between postmodernists & proponents of a scientific anthropology comes from differing opinions about anthropology's purpose.
- *If we can agree that goal of anthropology is to: 1) describe & explain human affairs; & 2) teach reader subjective meaning of human experience, then scientific & post-modern goals of anthropology are in fact complementary.*

## Postmodernism

- Pierre Bourdieu, *Structures, habitus, Practices* (1980)
- Michel Foucault, *The Incitement to Discourse* (1978)
- Renato Rosaldo, *Grief and a Headhunter's Rage* (1989)
- Abu-Lughod, *A Tale of Two Pregnancies* (1991)

## Postmodernism

- Lila Abu-Lughod
- Ph.D. Harvard University, 1984
- Professor of Anthropology, Columbia University.
- Publications include:
  - 1986. *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society*.
  - 1993. *Writing Women's Worlds: Bedouin Stories*.
  - 1998. *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East*, edited.
  - 2002. *Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain*.
  - 2005. *Dramas of Nationhood: The Politics of Television in Egypt*.



## Lila Abu-Lughod

- Concern about *politics of representation* led her to began to think about ethnographic writing itself.
- Interests in gender in Arab world, post-colonial theory, history & contemporary politics of Middle Eastern feminisms.

## Lila Abu-Lughod

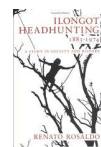
- In *A Tale of Two Pregnancies* (1991) Abu-Lughod reflects on her own pregnancy (informed by both Western medical knowledge) & knowledge of childbirth she acquired from various women in Egypt.
- Critical of traditional ethnographic writing that draws sharp distinction between self & other.
- Should write ethnographies of the particular.

## Postmodernism

- Renato Rosaldo
- Ph.D. Harvard University 1971.
- Professor of Anthropology @ New York University.
- Previously @ at Stanford University.
- Field research among Ilongot of northern Luzon, Philippines.
- Publications include:
  - Ilongot Headhunting, 1883-1974: A Study in Society and History*. 1980
  - 1989 *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis*



<http://www.stanford.edu/group/howwrite/Bios/renatorosaldo/index.html>



### Postmodernism

- In *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* Rosaldo took issue with traditional methods & goals of anthropology as a social science.
- His argument revolves around & regularly returns to introductory chapter, "Grief and a Headhunter's Rage."
- This was an account of he came to an intuitive understanding of an ethnographic conundrum—equation of grief with rage by Ilongot headhunters—through experience of his own wife's untimely death.
- A very personal & moving account of profound grief and loss.
  - its writing was, he says, therapeutic.

### Postmodernism

"If you ask an older Ilongot man of northern Luzon, Philippines, why he cuts off human heads, his answer is brief, and one on which no anthropologist can readily elaborate: He says that rage, born of grief, impels him to kill his fellow human beings. He claims that he needs a place "to carry his anger." The act of severing and tossing away the victim's head enables him, he says, to vent and, he hopes, throw away the anger of his bereavement. . . . To him, grief, rage, and headhunting go together in a self-evident manner. Either you understand it or you don't. And, in fact, for the longest time I simply did not"

### Postmodernism

- In 1981, his wife Michelle Rosaldo slipped over a precipice & fell to her death while doing fieldwork in Luzon.
- Rosaldo experienced an overwhelming flood of emotions; grief
- Also intense anger elicited by devastating loss.
- Only then, he claims, was he finally able to understand what his Ilongot friends had been telling him about rage inherent in grief.

### Postmodernism

- Event led him to two conclusions.
- 1. Ilongots' *grief & rage* is an irreducible brute ethnographic fact that *is* crucial motive for headhunting & is *impervious to further explanation*
  - Rage born of devastating loss animates older men's desire to raid.
  - This anger at abandonment is irreducible in that nothing at a deeper level explains it...
- 2. Such *unexplainable phenomena* could only be understood by *empathetic "positioning" of observer through similar experience.*

### Postmodernism

"The ethnographer, as a positioned subject, grasps certain human phenomena better than others. He or she occupies a position or structural location and observes with a particular angle of vision. . . . In the case at hand, nothing in my own experience equipped me even to imagine the anger possible in bereavement until after Michelle Rosaldo's death in 1981. Only then was I in a position to grasp the force of what Ilongots had repeatedly told me about grief, rage, and headhunting." (Rosaldo 1989:19)

### Postmodernism

- Implication is that interpretation of *all* ethnographic events is dependent on the "position" of the observer.
- Rosaldo's intuitive understanding of Ilongot grief/rage was possible only after he was experientially "repositioned" by death of his wife.
- That understanding, and by implication all ethnographic understanding, is contingent on such "positioning"
- There are potentially as many alternative understandings as there are "positions," and all are equally valid.
- "Such terms as *objectivity*, *neutrality*, and *impartiality* refer to subject positions once endowed with great institutional authority, but they are arguably neither more nor less valid than those of more engaged, yet equally perceptive, knowledgeable social actors." (Rosaldo 1989:21).