

Editorial: After hybridity

How hard is it to think ‘critical junctions’? How far have we really traveled ‘after primordialism’, to quote the title of Arjun Appadurai’s seminal essay (1996)? How far, in other words, have we gone beyond the anthropology of ‘culture-people-place’? And are we now really perceiving in its stead the overlapping webs of trans-local and transnational influences, coming together in particular combinations and sequences at particular nodes in space, that Eric Wolf two and more decades ago was urging us to look for? Are we getting closer to this global anthropology?

Outside academia the mood on this burning issue of public anthropology is more schizophrenic than ever. On the one hand there is indisputable advance. Take the movies as an index of what the West is currently able to imagine: recent films such as *Syriana* and *The constant gardener* are composed on the bedrock of a compelling awareness of the power of space and speed in producing the illusions of deep emplacement or the seductive *couleurs locales* of local still-lives. *Syriana*’s cocktail is breathtaking and represents an acceleration of the cinematographic ‘spatial switch’. In rapid alternation, it links suburban family life in Virginia, corporate deceit and power politics in Washington DC, intra-elite rivalries on both sides of the Persian Gulf, hidden Hamas-CIA histories in Beirut, and oppressed and alienated Pakistani migrant workers in the compounds surrounding the oil installations. At each turn in the film—as it were as the perverse result of what happens when the chain linking the sites is set in motion—the men from Pakistan, initially fantasizing vividly about the sights of the white Himalayan peaks back home, later just about their wives and mothers finally joining them in the

Gulf, are pushed onto the path of violent martyrdom. They are lured by the apocalyptic teachings and the intimate environment of the madrasses that are sponsored from the abundance of the white dressed Saudi oil sheiks in their tête-à-tête with the white peaks of the American elite. *The constant gardener* does something similar, now linking corporate boardrooms in London, unemployment in Wales, Western pharmacological research under conditions of fierce competition, cynical powerbrokers and old-style liberal English elites on the one side, and the decline of Kenya, African epidemics, premature and criminal deaths, and child soldiers in South Sudan on the other. The rapid alternation between histories, classes, and locations serves here as a powerful device for hyperrealism. If the Western critical imagination has indeed finally digested Eric Wolf’s message, who would deny that Eric was helped by the recent misfortunes of globalization and empire?

State bureaucrats, too, are learning their critical junctions rapidly these days. In the mid-nineties the US embassy in Islamabad could still make the astounding judgment that the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan was an isolated Afghan mystery, emerging from the depths of Afghan culture after the Soviets had gone, as Stephen Coll explains in *Ghost wars* (2005). This Pulitzer Price winning book is another example of the success of global anthropology à la Wolf. It shows again to what extent the US itself has been one of the midwives for the birth of the Taliban, without much self-reflection. Western administrators, meanwhile, have become utterly keen to look overseas for explaining local outcomes. This is not only so among security and immi-

gration services. Take the British concern with child prostitution in countries like Costa Rica. The Blair regime is sponsoring remedial action in the Caribbean because, presumably, child prostitutes over there increase the likelihood of British tourists turning into pedophiles back home (*Financial Times*, 14 March 2006: 4).

This example underlines a major irony of our times. Due once more to the misfortunes of globalization and empire, states and publics have increasingly used their sharpened spatial imaginations for drawing hard and proactive boundaries around 'home' territories perceived to be under threat. In the process they are creating hard-bounded cultures that are represented—manicheally and comically—as everything they imagine their cultural enemies are not. Witness the film that the Dutch (anti-) immigration authorities have produced in an attempt to forewarn potential Islamic immigrants of the moral morass they will be entering: it represents life in the low countries as a medley of bare breasts on the beach and gays kissing in the park; and this in a cold rainy country under a right-wing government led by a prime minister more ostentatiously prudish than any of his forebears since the seventies. Connectivity, beyond just facilitating the narcissism of minor differences à la Freud, is breeding a narcissism of comic distortion.

Culture talk has been spreading for a good decade now and is increasingly fueling a new bonfire of the vanities. The vanities are not anymore those of class and race, as in Tom Wolfe's 1985 book with the similar title. They are the vanities of imagined cultural selves. These may have everything to do with class, locally and globally, but get dressed in the hot cloak of culture, pushing them beyond commensurability. That good decade, then, is the decade in which we have moved from 'after primordialism' to 'after hybridity'. It is the era in which connectivity had ventured beyond the mere widening of markets and increasing of cultural consumer choice to hit the point where people, pain, and power meet. Do not picture cultural thickening as a necessary outcome, but do see it as one that could ever more easily be forced by whoever was ready to campaign on the public's *Unbehagen*.

This issue of *Focaal* is about global connection and local selves in the making. It features two vital but partly opposing approaches for explaining the process. Nina Glick Schiller, in her introduction to the theme section on the transnational generation of local protest, argues strongly that local collective action is historically and sequentially constituted through transnational networks, resources, and discourses, or better: by the historical insertions of localities in particular slots in transnational social fields. For her, and Saleemink, Ghorashi, Spiereburg and their contributors the global is a deeply contradictory field that generates both the external pressures of capital, culture, and coercion that shape local habitats as well as the resources for citizens to articulate voice and counter-force. The process, resources, tools, and outcome, indeed local life as such, cannot be thought of without envisioning the actual and profoundly contradictory transnational fields in action. The local is transnational, Glick Schiller emphasizes. For her and her collaborators this does not at all deny agency, but it does affect how we think of its sources and meanings. Dawson's elegant story of the recent Sydney beach riots is a fitting illustration, as are Bal and Sinha-Kerkhof's findings on a transnational nexus in the making of Indian nationalism.

On the face of it, this amounts precisely to the 'disempowerment of place' that Arturo Escobar, in his contribution, warns against. He insists on the 'radical alterity' of local identities, an alterity that should be rescued against the onslaught of global forces with radically superior resources. His essay is fully consonant with his earlier claim that 'culture sits in places' (2001) and it emphatically separates and opposes the local and the global, something the theme section resolutely rejects. One way to read these colliding approaches is as a byproduct of differences in strategy and objectives, rather than as the reflection of ontologically incommensurable visions, although that may be happening too. A precise read suggests that there is lots of space for increased conceptual specification. While the transnational perspective appears analytically more persuasive to me, the 'local alterity' approach may be strategically more eloquent in helping to forge the polit-

ical and juridical tools for carving out some sheltered space in the tracks of neo-liberal globalization and empire. In fact, cultural alterity has in some respects started to function as the post-modern equivalent of class in urging compromise on behalf of power equalities between the haves and have-nots. Hybridity can never be a hot

enough battle cry for doing that. But while emphasizing alterity may help subaltern mobilizations in Latin America, it does generate some scary dilemmas elsewhere, however comical they may appear at first encounter.

— *Don Kalb*