
Theorizing Otherness Cultural Encounter and the Politics of Ethnographic Representation

Omar ID MOULID

Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) Faculté des Langues, des Arts et des Sciences Humaines Pôle Universitaire Ait Melloul, Université Ibn Zohr Agadir- Morocco ORCID : 0009-0000-9256-242X

ABSTRACT: This article examines how the notion of Otherness is produced, negotiated, and contested within the encounter between the anthropologist and the informant. Drawing on postcolonial and cultural theory -notably the work of James Clifford, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, Edward Said, Michel Foucault, and Clifford Geertz- the article argues that the ethnographic “cultural encounter” is neither neutral nor symmetrical, but a discursively conditioned site of power wherein identity, space, and difference are continuously negotiated. The discussion unfolds in three movements: first, it (re)conceptualizes cultural encounter as a dialogical process in which ethnographic authority is produced rather than simply recorded; second, it interrogates the spatial and social paradoxes that structure fieldwork, showing how space itself is an instrument of power; and third, it turns to the mechanics of “Othering” in colonial and anthropological discourse, culminating in a reading of Bhabha’s concept of colonial mimicry as a site of ambivalence and, potentially, of resistance. The article concludes that Otherness and Difference are not fixed essences but negotiable products of dialogue -an insight with direct consequences for how ethnographic authority ought to be understood and performed.

KEYWORDS: Otherness; cultural encounter; postcolonial theory; ethnographic authority; mimicry; third space; anthropology

INTRODUCTION

If we consider the contemporary world as a symbolic market open to different, patterns, systems and modes of existence as well as discursive practices germane to rituals, believes, cults, patterns of behavior, traits and attributes; constitutive to ‘National Character’ and of a Nation as such, then Morocco occupies an inimitable place for anthropologists whose main ostensible focus has often been to discern cultural patterns, forms of representation, systems of relations, relations per se, code-dressing and any ‘mode of knowledge’ worthy of help as to fathom the interlocutors’ world view in the sanctity of their consciences, and in the publicity of their normative and moral behavior. At this junction, anthropology has gained special place as a ‘scientific discipline’ of knowledge making and knowledge production despite huge criticism it has received from critics. During its incipient inauguration anthropology juxtaposed with a long bloody process of coloniality; a giant machine of ‘Othering’ that made use of oriental/colonial discourses classifying the non-white Europeans in terms racial and ahistorical as contemptuous, despicable, unknowable lesser beings.

Anthropology has long presented itself as a discipline of encounter: the interlocution, in the field, of an observing self and an observed other. Yet this intersection is rarely the neutral, transparent event it is sometimes made out to be. It is, rather, a site thoroughly conditioned by history, ideology, and asymmetries of power —what this article calls, following the vocabulary of cultural and postcolonial theory, the “cultural encounter.” This article sets out to (re)conceptualize cultural encounter in anthropology and to examine how it both shapes, and is reshaped by, social practice and cultural difference.

The argument advanced here is that Otherness and Difference are not natural or fixed categories awaiting neutral description, but are negotiable: the production of ethnographic authority is inherently dialogical, an interlocution that occurs at the junction of the differing worldviews carried by the anthropologist and the informant alike. Understood in this way, cultural encounter determines the very terms in which Otherness is articulated, and it raises pressing ethical questions about agency, voice, and the right to represent. The anthropologist and the informant are bound together in a nexus that is characteristically dialogical: both parties are cognizant of the fact that family, age, class, and community are always at play in their dialogue, which demands of the ethnographer both a recognition of these power asymmetries and an acknowledgment of the informant’s own role in shaping the resulting narrative.

Within this ambit, the anthropological encounter is morphed into a site of negotiation in which meanings are contested, redefined, and produced. This calls for reflexivity: the ethnographer must critically examine his or her own positionality and the political implications of representing others. The (re)presentation of the “Other” is thus not a mere intellectual exercise in giving

Theorizing Otherness Cultural Encounter and the Politics of Ethnographic Representation

voice to the voiceless; it is a serious challenge to situate the self within an unfamiliar space, and to integrate that self into a web of customs foreign to it. Recognizing the fluidity of Otherness and Difference is, in this sense, a precondition for any adequate understanding of cultural dynamics and of the complexity of human experience.

The discussion that follows proceeds in three stages. The first section approaches cultural encounter historically and theoretically, situating it within the legacy of colonial (mis)representation. The second focuses on the spatial and social paradoxes that structure fieldwork, asking how space itself becomes an instrument of power. The third examines the mechanics of “Othering” directly, culminating in a discussion of Homi Bhabha’s notion of colonial mimicry as a site of ambivalence- and, potentially, of resistance.

Approaching Cultural Encounter

It is useful to begin with the observation that the cultural encounter between colonizer and colonized has historically been marked by the establishment of racial, biased, and stereotypical representations. Such (mis)representations are not incidental or superficial narrative flourishes visited upon peoples already subject to violence; they are deeply entrenched in the historical and ideological contexts that structure power between the two groups, in the sense that representation itself becomes an apparatus of control, mobilized to serve the interests of colonial power. Cultural encounters, read this way, expose the exploitative mechanisms through which identities are defined, differentiated, and often tainted, and they illuminate the ideological forces that have shaped contemporary notions of ‘Identity’ and ‘Otherness.’

The concepts of Difference and alterity are central here, because they foreground the fact that identities are not static or continuous but fluid and discontinuous, negotiated anew within shifting cultural and social contexts. The historical legacy of colonialism continues to inform modern ethnographic practice, and the tension between the colonizer’s perceptions and the colonized’s lived experience provides fertile ground for understanding how stereotypes are produced, perpetuated, and contested. James Clifford highlights this predicament when he writes that:

Understanding other arises initially from the sheer fact of coexistence in a shared world; but this experiential world, an intersubjective ground for objective forms of knowledge, is precisely what is missing or problematic for an ethnographer entering an alien culture ... data constituted in discursive, dialogical conditions are appropriated only in textualized forms.

Research events and encounters become field notes. Experiences become narratives, meaningful occurrences or examples.

Clifford (1988, 35–39)

Clifford’s point is that understanding another culture begins with the fundamental fact of coexistence within a shared world. It is an intersubjective condition that questions any claim to purely objective knowledge. Ethnographic insight is, on this account, deeply subjective, contextbased, and shaped by the positionality of the researcher; the Western claim to epistemic superiority over the ‘Third World’ is thereby challenged by the native’s own participation in the production of ethnographic representation. Yet this same insight raises a further concern: the transformation of lived, dialogical experience into textual form — into ‘field notes’ — risks oversimplifying or distorting the cultures under study. Ethnographers must reckon with the fact that their narratives, however valuable, may offer little more than commodified cultural fragments abstracted for academic use, which in turn raises pointed ethical questions about authorship and voice: who has the authority to tell these stories, and how does that authority shape the resulting description?

Gayatri Spivak pursues a cognate line of criticism in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988), arguing that subjectivity itself is constituted by shifting discourses that position both ethnographer and informant within particular relations of power. Spivak directs her critique against the assumption that human beings are ‘sovereign subjects’ possessed of fully autonomous agency over their own consciousness. It is an assumption that she regards as an oversimplification of the human condition. As she puts it,

In the constitution of that Other of Europe, great care was taken to obliterate the textual ingredients with which such a subject could cathect, could occupy (invest?) its itinerary — not only by ideological and scientific production, but also by the institution of the law. ... This project is also the asymmetrical obliteration of the trace of that Other in its precarious subjectivity.

Spivak (2003, 24–28)

Spivak’s passage mounts a subtle critique of the construction of the ‘Other’ in European thought, showing how identity is shaped through ideology, scientific discourse, and law working in concert to obliterate the ‘textual ingredients’ through which the Other might otherwise invest meaning into its own identity. The dominant culture, in casting these complexities aside, reduces the Other to a simplified representation; the ‘asymmetrical obliteration’ Spivak describes is the trace of that same power asymmetry, an active erasure of the Other’s precarious subjectivity that nonetheless leaves vestiges capable of unsettling the dominant narrative. In a related register, Johannes Fabian observes that the ‘other is never simply given, never just found or encountered, but made,’ so that any investigation into Othering is, at bottom, an investigation into how anthropology produces its own object (Fabian 1990, 753–772).

Mary Louise Pratt’s concept of the ‘Contact Zone’ develops this line of thought further, emphasizing that identity is neither fixed nor stable but a continuous process of hybridization (Pratt 1992, 1–11). This disruptive, unfinished quality of identity is central

Theorizing Otherness Cultural Encounter and the Politics of Ethnographic Representation

to the interlocation between observer and observed: it lends their encounter a sense of meaning predicated on the unknown, while also subjecting the encounter to systems of inclusion and exclusion that serve power. Homi Bhabha's related notion of hybridity locates cultural statement and meaning not in a text to be read, in Geertz's sense, but in what he calls a 'Third Space of enunciation'. It is a space in which multiple, often contradictory possibilities are entangled, and in which identity is experienced not as a normative given but as an expression of open-ended choice. As Bhabha writes,

The intervention of the Third Space of enunciation, which makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process, destroys this mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is customarily revealed as an integrated, open, expanding code. ... It is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew.

Bhabha (1994, 19–39)

Much as Bakhtin's dialogism dissolves the notion of a single, self-identical voice, Bhabha's Third Space is marked by the erosion of a single identity in favor of a dialogical, hybrid space in which anthropologist and informant co-exist. The ethnographic space, on this account, is itself a product of cultural encounter: it shapes, and is shaped by, the way culture is understood and communicated, disrupting any notion of a homogeneous or stable cultural identity and allowing cultural signs to be reinterpreted, translated, and rehistoricized. In short, the cultural encounter, however dialogical and hybrid, remains discursively conditioned by a set of institutional conventions; it is, by definition, an outcome of the negotiation of similarities and differences that renders the individual a hybrid subject. It is to the spatial and social paradoxes that structure this negotiation that the discussion now turns.

Space, Power, and the Ethnographic Encounter James Clifford observes that:

Every appropriation of culture, whether by insiders or outsiders, implies a specific temporal position and form of historical narration. Gathering, owning, classifying, and valuing are certainly not restricted to the West; but elsewhere these activities need not be associated with accumulation (rather than redistribution) or with preservation (rather than natural or historical decay).

Clifford (1988, 232)

It follows that fieldwork is neither a neutral method indifferent to the observer's own collective experience, nor an objective procedure the ethnographer simply follows to reach given results. It is, instead, structured by an array of ideologies and power dynamics that shape both parties to the encounter: field knowledge is produced within power structures that determine how the interlocation between ethnographer and informant is produced, interpreted, and understood, exposing the intricate entanglement of cultural representation and positionality.

Clifford's excerpt draws attention to the pivotal role culture plays in constituting the categories of spatial and social paradox. 'Space,' in this context, carries two related meanings, tied to site and to sight. At one level, space is constituted through engagement in the dynamics of socio-cultural power relations, and is thereby marked and linked to local histories, memories, and human achievement (Said 1993, 3–14). In other words, space is a discursive construct rather than an absolute given. Clifford's contrast between accumulation and redistribution of knowledge directs a critique against Western paradigms of ownership, gesturing instead toward alternative practices that privilege communal engagement over individual possession; his reference to 'natural or historical decay' likewise contests the notion of static preservation, suggesting that cultural spaces are dynamic and subject to change, loss, and transformation. In this regard, cultural appropriation, is a multifaceted process that continuously reshapes meaning, experience, history, and memory at both the individual and the collective level.

Space, moreover, has always been closely connected to subjectivity, given the enduring relation between space and human practice. As Michel de Certeau puts it, "space is a practiced place. Thus, the street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into a space by walkers. In the same way, an act of reading is the space produced by the practice of a particular place" (de Certeau 1984, 167). On this view, ethnographic space is a site of struggle and contestation over the production of life practices, values, conventions, and discourses -a site where anthropologist and informant contest and produce mutual understanding. Michel Foucault extends this point, observing that space is "fundamental in any form of communal life; space is fundamental in any exercise of power" (Foucault 1993, 134–140). Power, in other words, is exercised not only through law or institution but through the corporeal organization of environments such as cities, prisons, schools. As such, it subtly operates through everyday practice to define and shape individual action within a given social order.

Thought in these terms, cultural encounter is complicated by the interplay of multiple subjectivities and political constraints: the ethnographic practice of participant observation tends to be constituted by the social practices and discourses of the observer, often at the expense of excluding the observed from the resulting text. Clifford Geertz's reading of the Moroccan bazaar as both space and culture illustrates the point:

The bazaar is more than another demonstration of the truth, under whatever skies, men prefer to buy cheap and sell dear. It is a distinctive system of social relationships centring around the production and consumption of goods and services — that is, a particular kind of economy, and it deserves analyses as such.

Theorizing Otherness Cultural Encounter and the Politics of Ethnographic Representation

Geertz (1992, 225–232)

Bhabha's Third Space is, again, instructive here, insofar as it allows polarities to be avoided and the self to be experienced as the 'Other.' It permits the ethnographic space to be conceived as the outcome of an interactive cultural encounter in which the categories of self and other are explored, refined, and performed. Hence, it clarifies how ethnographic representations continue to be (re)shaped by colonial discourses that frame the 'Other' in ways that reflect asymmetric power relations and sustain domination. The following section takes up this process of Othering directly.

Encountering Otherness

This sub-section examines how the 'Other' is (re)constructed within anthropological and colonial discourse, and how these discourses frame — and thereby solidify — the 'Other' within a structure of domination, often articulated through racial and ideological registers. Othering the oriental, or the other more broadly, entails the construction of a set of binary oppositions through which the non-European is rendered inferior, exotic, and deviant — a figure to be conquered and taught how to live. Such representations contribute to a sustained process of marginalization and vilification, in which the mores, norms, and values of subalternized subjects are habitually deciphered as backward and uncivilized (on the concept of the 'Other' as constitutive of the 'normal,' (Barker 2004, 139–140).

Because the very notion of 'Otherness' is articulated from within Western frames of knowledge, postcolonial theorists of anthropology have tended to renounce the term, on the grounds that it has helped consolidate the colonial anthropological and orientalist discourses that (mis)represent the observed as 'irrational,' 'uncivilized,' and 'exotic.' As Homi Bhabha argues, understanding the power of colonial discourse requires interrogating 'the mode of representation of otherness' itself, given its crucial role in (re)shaping perceptions of difference and reinforcing structures of power (Bhabha 1994, 68). This process of representation is not neutral: it reflects and perpetuates existing hierarchies of discrimination and taxonomy, under which the 'Other' is consigned to the margins of knowledge and history. James Clifford articulates the resulting self/other dichotomy with particular clarity:

Ethnography is moving into areas long occupied by sociology, the novel, or avantgarde cultural critique ... rediscovering otherness and difference within the cultures of the West. It has become clear that every version of an 'Other', wherever found, is also the construction of a 'self' and the making of ethnographic texts ... is the constant reconstruction of selves and others through specific exclusions, conventions, and discursive practices.

Clifford (1986, 23–24)

Clifford's point is that the construction of Otherness is inseparable from the construction of selfhood: ethnography's rediscovery of otherness within Western societies exposes the reciprocal process by which representations of the 'Other' define the boundaries of the dominant culture itself. Ethnographic texts, on this account, are not objective reflections of reality but are constituted through exclusions, conventions, and discursive practices collectively established and reproduced. Ethnography becomes an active process of meaning-making in which depictions of cultural difference are bound up with how societies define and understand their own being in the world. Edward Said extends this argument, insisting that Otherness and Difference cannot be abstracted from their historical and worldly context:

The most striking thing about 'otherness' and 'difference' is, as with all general terms, how profoundly conditioned they are by their historical and worldly context. ... to practice anthropology [is] therefore not just to be doing scholarly work investigating 'otherness' and 'difference' in a large country; it is to be discussing them in an enormously influential and powerful state whose global role is that of a superpower.

Said (1989, 205–225)

The politics of Otherness in ethnographic representation, in other words, rests on a principle that sorts individuals into the ethnographer's imaginary categories of 'us' and 'them'; the cultural encounter demands that this binary opposition — itself built upon orientalist discourse — be dismantled in favour of counter-discourses of Otherness. Where Said emphasizes the system of binary opposition, Bhabha regards the construction of Otherness instead as the product of an encounter between multiple cultural narratives, resisting any tendency to essentialize the 'third world.' For Bhabha, there is always a certain ambivalence at the site of colonial domination, because colonizer and colonized — in anthropological terms, observer and observed — are dialectically and paradoxically bound up in the process of (re)defining one another. As Bhabha writes of colonial mimicry,

Colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continuously produce its slippage, its excess, its difference. The authority of that mode of colonial discourse that I have called mimicry is therefore stricken by an indeterminacy: mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal.

Bhabha (1994, 85–92)

Building on Bhabha's account of the politics of otherness in colonial discourse, Graham Huggan argues that the ethnographer's authority over the informant is itself marked by disruption and discontinuity, which opens a space for the observer's taken-for-granted stereotypes to be challenged and dismantled. The informant's agentive role, in other words, is partially retrieved and

Theorizing Otherness Cultural Encounter and the Politics of Ethnographic Representation

performed by introducing into his or her own being-in-the-world a pattern of reference presumed to belong exclusively to the observer. Bhabha's account further highlights a tendency toward producing a 'reformed, recognizable Other' who exhibits a sense of loss and disorder, whereby colonial power seeks an obedient subject that imitates Western modes of being while remaining marked as distinct from them. This ambivalence is essential precisely because it reveals the incongruities constitutive of colonial discourse: mimicry simultaneously reinforces and undermines colonial authority. Bhabha's language of 'slippage' and 'excess' designates an ongoing negotiation of identity in which the colonized subject both adopts and resists the colonizer's attributes, so that mimicry becomes a site of indeterminacy that both challenges the foundations of colonial power and exposes the contradictions within the discourse of domination.

For Huggan, this same indeterminacy means that the informant is never a mere replica of the observer:

Between the crossed desires of mimicry and mimesis, there emerges a mode of representation that mocks the power of the dominant culture to act, and to see itself, as a model ... Mimesis here emerges as a self-empowering representation, a stagemanaged encounter that mediates between alternative symbolic worlds.

Huggan (1997–98, 91–106)

Huggan's argument turns on the tension between mimicry and mimesis in postcolonial contexts: mimesis becomes a subversive, self-empowering act, mocking the dominant culture's claim to serve as a model by exposing its own contradictions rather than simply imitating it. Mimesis is thereby transformed into a form of resistance, through which marginalized groups mediate between their own cultural frameworks and those imposed upon them — and through which the subaltern is reminded of an intellectual potential capable of investing their being in the world with meaning and coherence. In short, mimicry, for Bhabha, is not passive replication but an active process of which both the subaltern and the observed remain acutely aware: a transformative encounter that at once confirms agency and challenges the authority of the dominant culture.

CONCLUSION

This article has sought to conceptualize the cultural encounter as a discursive and dialogical process rather than a neutral meeting of minds. Three movements have structured the argument. The first approached cultural encounter historically and theoretically, arguing through the prisms of Clifford, Spivak, Fabian, Pratt, and Bhabha that ethnographic authority is negotiated rather than simply asserted, and that identity itself is a fluid, hybrid product of encounter rather than a fixed possession of either party. The second turned to the spatial and social paradoxes of fieldwork, showing, with Clifford, de Certeau, Foucault, and Geertz, that space is never a neutral backdrop to ethnographic practice but is itself an instrument and expression of power. The third examined the mechanics of Othering directly, tracing how anthropological and colonial discourse have constructed the 'Other' through binary opposition (Said) and through the more ambivalent dynamics of mimicry (Bhabha, Huggan) -dynamics in which the observed is never merely passive, but retains the capacity to unsettle the authority of the observer.

Taken together, these three movements support the article's central claim: that Otherness and Difference are not essential or self-evident categories awaiting neutral ethnographic description, but are negotiable products of a dialogical encounter conditioned, at every turn, by history, ideology, and asymmetries of power. Anthropological and orientalist discourses have long described the individuals and communities under study as static, ahistorical, or shaman-like -a (mis)representation that both entrenches cliché-ridden stereotypes and forecloses recognition of the observed community's capacity for change. Recognizing the dialogical and negotiable character of cultural encounter is, accordingly, not merely a theoretical nicety: it is a precondition for any ethnographic practice that seeks to grant the informant genuine agency and voice, rather than the reflected image of the observer's own assumptions.

REFERENCES

- 1) Barker, C. (2004). *The SAGE dictionary of cultural studies*. SAGE Publications.
- 2) Bhabha, H. K. (1994a). The commitment to theory. In *The location of culture* (pp. 19–39). Routledge.
- 3) Bhabha, H. K. (1994b). Of mimicry and man: The ambivalence of colonial discourse. In *The location of culture* (pp. 85–92). Routledge.
- 4) Bhabha, H. K. (1994c). The other question: Stereotype, discrimination and the discourse of colonialism. In *The location of culture* (pp. 66–84). Routledge.
- 5) Clifford, J. (1986). Introduction: Partial truths. In J. Clifford & G. E. Marcus (Eds.), *Writing culture: The poetics and politics of ethnography* (pp. 1–26). University of California Press.
- 6) Clifford, J. (1988a). On collecting art and culture. In *The predicament of culture: Twentiethcentury ethnography, literature, and art* (pp. 215–251). Harvard University Press.
- 7) Clifford, J. (1988b). On ethnographic authority. In *The predicament of culture: Twentiethcentury ethnography, literature, and art* (pp. 21–54). Harvard University Press.
- 8) de Certeau, M. (1984). *The practice of everyday life* (S. F. Rendall, Trans.). University of California Press.

Theorizing Otherness Cultural Encounter and the Politics of Ethnographic Representation

- 9) Fabian, J. (1990). Presence and representation: The other and anthropological writing. *Critical Inquiry*, 16(4), 753–772.
- 10) Foucault, M. (1993). Space, power and knowledge. In S. During (Ed.), *The cultural studies reader* (pp. 134–140). Routledge.
- 11) Geertz, C. (1992). The bazaar economy: Information and search in peasant marketing. In M. Granovetter & R. Swedberg (Eds.), *The sociology of economic life* (pp. 225–232). Westview Press.
- 12) Huggan, G. (1997–1998). (Post)colonialism, anthropology, and the magic of mimesis. *Cultural Critique*, (38), 91–106.
- 13) Pratt, M. L. (1992). *Imperial eyes: Travel writing and transculturation*. Routledge.
- 14) Said, E. W. (1989). Representing the colonized: Anthropology's interlocutors. *Critical Inquiry*, 15(2), 205–225.
- 15) Said, E. W. (1993). Empire, geography, and culture. In *Culture and imperialism* (pp. 3–14). Vintage Books.
- 16) Spivak, G. C. (2003). Can the subaltern speak? In B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths, & H. Tiffin (Eds.), *The post-colonial studies reader* (pp. 24–28). Routledge.



There is an Open Access article, distributed under the term of the Creative Commons Attribution – Non-Commercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits remixing, adapting and building upon the work for non-commercial use, provided the original work is properly cited.