

EDITORIAL STRUCTURE

Editors-in-Chief

Australia

Kingsley Garbett and David Murray (University of Adelaide)

Great Britain

Penelope Harvey and Richard Werbner (University of Manchester)

Canada

Michael Lambek and Janice Boddy (University of Toronto)

Managing Editors

Kingsley Garbett and David Murray

Editorial Assistant: *Marian Thompson*

Secretary: *Christine Lovell*

Editorial Panel: *K. Garbett, F. Magowan, C. McEachern, D. Murray, M. Roberts*

Editorial Consultants:

Greg Dening: *Department of History, University of Melbourne*

Chris Eipper: *Department of Anthropology & Sociology, La Trobe University*

Chris Gregory: *Dept. of Archaeology & Anthropology, Australian National University*

Signe Howell: *Department & Museum of Anthropology, University of Oslo*

Joel Kahn: *Department of Sociology & Anthropology, La Trobe University*

Bruce Kapferer: *Dept. of Anthropology, James Cook University of North Queensland*

Andrew Metcalfe: *School of Sociology, University of New South Wales*

Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney: *Department of Anthropology, University of Wisconsin*

Sherry Ortner: *Department of Anthropology, University of Michigan*

Chris Pinney: *School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London*

Anne Salmond: *Department of Maori Studies, University of Auckland*

Verena Stolcke: *Departament d'Història de les Societats Pre-capitalistes i d'Antropologia Social, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona*

Marilyn Strathern: *Department of Anthropology, University of Cambridge*

Margaret Trawick: *Department of Anthropology, Massey University*

Pnina Werbner: *Department of Sociology, University of Keele*

Anna Yeatman: *Department of Sociology, Macquarie University*

©2000 Department of Anthropology, University of Adelaide

SOCIAL ANALYSIS

Issue 43(3) November 1999

INTRODUCTION: Possibilities and Constraints in the Shaping of Subjectivities

Anne Meneley

This issue of *Social Analysis* investigates the structuring of subjectivities in specific material worlds. The theoretical influences in these papers are varied, yet a few theorists exert a pervasive influence. Raymond Williams' (1977) notion of "structures of feeling" allows us to think through how class dispositions are generated in various domains — forms of leisure and cultural production as well as economic relations. Carolyn Steedman's *Landscape for a Good Woman* (1986) provides another touchstone for several of the papers. Although none of the authors cross the same empirical ground as Steedman in her memoir and class history of 1950s Britain, we have found her theoretical insights to illuminate the very different landscapes we investigate here. One, Steedman focuses on the fact that class subjectivities are always gendered. Two, she attends to the role of material objects — clothes, consumer goods, and food — in constituting subjectivities. Desires are often aroused without being attainable, giving bitterness a prominence in the structures of feeling in the working class world that Steedman describes. Although the worlds engaged in this collection are quite different, we all focus on how subjectivities are shaped in relation to material worlds — the world that one lives in or is excluded from — with particular histories. Steedman's insight that the study of psychology — a dominant site for theories of subjectivity — is truly lacking unless class is taken into account, is one we have taken to heart. Her style of history is also useful as a model because of its focus on the idiosyncratic responses of individuals to the specificities of their own life histories within wider class positions. Steedman is also careful not to abstract a notion of class from its historical period. Therefore, we can draw on the theoretical implications of her work rather than the particular period she describes, to guide us in developing a critical sensitivity to how people, emotions, and goods are variously intertwined.

Another theme uniting the papers is an awareness of the constraints people face in various social worlds. In relationships of power, people find themselves in particular types of binds, which restrict what they can do and how they can imagine themselves, or have their desires gratified. Diverse forms of restriction — imposed by military regimes, patriarchal families, anthropological training, colonial domination or cruel economies — provide the backdrop to these papers.

DuBois cites Steedman's poignant concern with lives "for whom the central

interpretive devices don't quite work." In DuBois' paper we see that memories of Argentinian military dictatorships have particular implications for the gendered subjectivities of working class people of the neighbourhood called José Ingenieros. DuBois conveys how a feminine disposition is articulated in the dramatic tales of her 'valiant ladies', who recall their role in responding bravely, and often authoritatively, to a repressive dictatorship. Borrowing Williams' phrase, DuBois suggests that these women become a "resource of hope" in their struggle to achieve the goods and physical spaces that allow a decent life in a landscape coloured by cynicism.

Young's paper focuses on people in the eastern economic periphery of Canada who, given the regional high unemployment that leaves them marginal and dependent on the state, have never been disciplined to work. Their energy, creativity, and intelligence is sometimes devoted to the production of ritual play scenarios, inspired by the popular culture delivered to them in their youth by television. Their consumption of popular culture did not render these individuals playful postmodern subjects, but it did instill in them desires for things of the world, and desires to occupy other subject positions. Yet desire does not decree possibility and they are too often prevented from finding ways out of poverty.

Both Young and McLean engage situations in which the radical distinction between the 'real' and the 'unreal' on which modern subjectivities are founded is threatened. McLean's paper discusses how the Irish famine victims were "rendered strangers in the landscapes of their birth," as they wandered over the countryside starving and dispossessed. In the observers' harrowing descriptions of famine victims, McLean reads a disturbing disruption of the 'real' and the 'unreal': the victims with their distorted bodies and haunting eyes threaten the 'natural' distinction between the living and the dead. He suggests that the starving do not remain a 'spectacle'; rather they reach into the subjectivities of the observer, haunting them, upsetting notions of logical progression as starving children resemble wizened old men. Young's piece evokes a 'haunting' metaphor too: her subjects possess her as she contemplates her relationships and responsibilities to them, yet she discovers that they feel it is she who is haunting them.

While Young stresses the connection between narrative and structures of feelings acted out in situations of play, Meneley focuses on elite Muslim women's structuring of subjectivities within particular regimes of consumption. Like DuBois, she pays close attention to how subjectivities are gendered within particular classes. Goods transferred from men to women are at the same time a right, a sign of 'love' and a token of virtue. Taking inspiration from Steedman, she notes how people orient themselves in terms of specific notions of 'goodness' and that goods are themselves very much involved in 'structures of feeling'. Material neglect signifies an erosion of valued identity which is bitterly felt, yet cannot be talked about, because an elite woman's 'goodness' precludes her from complaining. Neglect may then be embodied in illness which elite women interpret as a weakening of their bodies that is caused by being undercut by kin. Here, as in Young's ethnographic case, goods crystallize social relationships.

Like Meneley, Gibb explores subjectivities inculcated in a Muslim society characterized by strict gender segregation. Through a consideration of her own subjectivity as an anthropologist and as a 'sexually cognizant knower', borrowing Kulick's term, Gibb explores a series of examples in which she contrasts her own assumptions about what constituted 'sexual behaviour' to those of her informants. Drawing on her ethnographic material from northeast Africa, she suggests how in some cases, meaningful relationships are defined more by exchanges of goods and emotional orientations than sexual acts. Gibb discusses how the straight-jacketing of our own subjectivities can prevent us from understanding the subjectivities of others. Young's paper also contemplates the subjectivity of the anthropologist by showing how the women she worked with problematize her identity and refract it back to her in a way she hadn't quite expected but can recognize, albeit with some discomfort.

The papers in this volume, by considering the problematics of the constitution of subjectivities of observer and observed as they encounter each other in relationships which are often complicated by material and conceptual inequities, significantly contribute to continuing discussions of the politics and epistemologies of the anthropological encounter. The papers together provide a case for the impossibility of divorcing the structuring of subjectivities from the material contours in which they are shaped.