



SPEAKING ABOUT ANTHROPOLOGICAL THEORY

Lila Abu-Lughod

Lila Abu-Lughod Interviewing Bedouin Women in West Egypt

The history of anthropological theory is a history of debate. What has most fascinated me about the debates is that they reveal how our thinking develops both as a process of argument within a discipline that has its own terms, methods, and parameters, and as a process fundamentally shaped by and participating in the larger sociopolitical contexts within which intellectual work is done. Because anthropology's purview is the world, to study the history of anthropological theory is also to study the wider world of which it is a part.

It is often only in retrospect that one can see outlines of the relationship between theorizing and politics. I was struck forcefully by this when I read Pierre Bourdieu's objections to the easy critiques, after the fact, of anthropology as colonial. In the preface to *The Logic of Practice* he asks what prevented lucid and well-intentioned scholars like himself from understanding things that are now self-evident, even to the least of these. He wonders at what he calls the "misplaced" *libido sciendi* that drove him, in the late 1950s in war-torn Algeria when he photographed symbols on covered stone storage jars, not to appreciate that the

reason he was able to pursue this passion for ritual and symbol was that the French army had destroyed the roof of the house and expelled its inhabitants (1990: 3). The problems, he argued, were both ethical and epistemological.

One of the most contentious debates in the recent history of anthropological theorizing occurred between Gananath Obeyesekere and Marshall Sahlins, two giants of the anthropological world in the last quarter of the twentieth century. At one level, the debate was about theory—about whether mythic structures determine historical action or whether all human action must be understood in terms of complex motivated pragmatic agency; it was also about cultural difference versus human similarity. At another level, however, the debate was about what the literary theorist Edward Said had captured in the catch phrase "Orientalism"—about the way knowledge and power have worked together in the "West's" domination of the "East," and, by extension, the non-West. Obeyesekere argues that Sahlins's interpretation of the Hawaiians' interpretation of Captain Cook as a god is itself another chapter in the self-serving Western

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myth—found earlier in Christian, evangelical, and even Shakespearean narratives—that savages see white men as gods. As himself “a native” from Sri Lanka, this anthropologist was skeptical.

Feminist anthropology has offered us a different kind of example of theorizing as worldly debate. Beginning in the 1970s, and closely tied to the political rebirth of a women’s movement in the United States and Britain, women anthropologists began asking hard questions about how the anthropological canon was formed and what was missing from the ethnographic record. Women’s lives had been invisible, occluding important issues about domination, relations between production and reproduction, and even about the critical role of sexuality in colonial relations. And why were women’s voices excluded from anthropological theorizing, including, in the 1980s, about “writing culture”? As in other phases, as anthropologists they faced inward and outward. Efforts were directed both at

critiquing a discipline that had ignored gender despite its claim that humanity was its subject matter and at answering urgent questions posed to them by feminists and activists about what anthropologists could illuminate for them about universals, cross-cultural differences, the determinants of gender equality and inequality, or the nature and culture of gender. Feminist anthropologists straddled more or less comfortably what Marilyn Strathern called the “awkward relationship” between anthropology and feminism. Since the late 1990s, as feminist anthropologists have gained prominence within the discipline—though often not for their work on gender—they have begun to be marginalized by what has become known as transnational feminism, a field of theorizing and activism that covers what conventionally was thought of as anthropological terrain: the world. In response, we now are doing ethnography on and developing theories about feminisms as social practices in the world. Surely this will engender new debates.

Lila Abu-Lughod is Professor of Anthropology and Women’s Studies at Columbia University. She has written three ethnographies based on fieldwork in Egypt: *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986); *Writing Women’s Worlds: Bedouin Stories* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993); and *Dramas of Nationhood: The Politics of Television in Egypt* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005). Her contributions to anthropological theorizing are crystallized in articles such as “The Romance of Resistance” (1990); “Writing Against Culture” (1991); “The Interpretation of Culture(s) After Television” (1997); and “Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?: Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others” (2002). For works cited in this essay, see *Speaking About Anthropological Theory in the Sources and Suggested Reading* at the end of this book.