

## PRAXIS: An Editorial Statement

By Kent Neely

Ethnologists have wrestled with questions of ethics and propriety for some time. One might state their dilemma simply as “Who is authorized to observe and to talk about a culture?” Can one take a purely scholarly position as observer and commentator? Is it possible for an ethnographer to refrain from marginalizing a group in the process? Can even serious, well-planned attempts result in anything other than cultural imperialism?

James Clifford, the noted ethnographer, deftly articulates the problem in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (University of California Press, 1986) in saying “Ethnographic truths are . . . inherently partial—committed and incomplete.” His observation is at once apologetic and diffident. Are not all accounts of culture tainted to some degree by the act of observation—regardless of the observer’s relation to the observed? Clifford cautions us to note that our knowledge about other cultures is always contingent; [they are the] . . . “problematic outcome of intersubjective dialogue, translation and projection” or, more succinctly, “ethnography is ultimately ‘stories within stories’” (109).

This dichotomy is lost neither on the scholar nor the layperson. A poignant example is given about the Cree hunter brought to Montreal to testify in court concerning the fate of his hunting lands in the new James Bay hydro electric scheme. As the oath was administered to the hunter, he hesitated and responded, “I’m not sure I can tell the truth . . . I can only tell what I know” (p. 8). The Cree hunter’s utter lack of duplicity summarizes the scholarly problem. Jamake Highwater, also a Native American, gives an ironic alternative. An accomplished novelist and a scholar adept within the traditional Western academy, Highwater is descended from Blackfeet and Cherokee ancestors. He reinterprets history and human knowledge through a Native American’s lens by using the scholarly tactics current in the West and, thereby, the observed comments on the observer.<sup>1</sup>

The ethnographer’s attempt to work between and within differing cultures and those cultures’s stories may be thwarted by a reluctance to participate or a resistance to validate the work on the part of the observed. That resistance, especially in today’s world, becomes manifest in a variety of ways. For example, nationalism or xenophobia is a (predictable?) response as borders are crossed by immigrants or sanctities are secularized or when power and wealth are threatened by redistribution. The xenophobe reverts to paranoia and chauvinism and resolves self-image deficiency by castigating the Other.

Benedict Anderson notes that humans have a need for continuity regarding our sense of identity in space and in time.<sup>2</sup> Anderson contends that nationalism (and xenophobia?) may be rooted in religions that provide that sense of continuity. His theorem would seem proven by the Islamic movements since 1980 and the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century clashes between Catholics and Protestants in Western Europe. More recent examples can be found in the rhetoric of both religious and quasi-religious people and groups like Pat Robertson and the Christian Broadcast Network, James Dobson of Focus on the Family or Gary Bauer of the Family Research Council in thinly veiled contempt for cross cultural issues (particularly if those issues include gender and sexuality).

These are not new questions for us in theatre. Peter Brook's *The Mahabharata* that toured to the United States in 1987 was a well publicized case in point. A number of scholars brought up the inconsistencies, omissions and mistakes between Brook's theatrical treatment and the Hindu original. Richard Schechner explored this issue two years earlier. He examined the "Plimoth Plantation" in Massachusetts as a recreation of early American history.<sup>3</sup> And a recent *Theatre Journal* (March 1998) dedicated to "diaspora and the politics of home" proves that the problem remains acute a decade after the Brook and Schechner incidents.

The equivocation between experiential and theatrical representations of culture continues yet scholars have not resolved the fundamental ethnographic conundrum. Christopher Balme's excellent examination "Staging the Pacific: Framing Authenticity in Performances for Tourists at the Polynesian Cultural Center" in the above noted *Theatre Journal* concludes that "authenticity" within a tourist performance is affected by both the Other and the observer—both modifying their "codes to meet the perceived patterns of expectation." (69). But considering Balme's observations of the Polynesian Cultural Center or Brook's production of *The Mahabharata* one returns to the question of finding authenticity without affecting or offending the culture observed. Is it possible?

Our need to pursue this discourse is crucial. Current events at the beginning of 1999 remind us of the necessity to exchange knowledge about cultural differences. Review the situation in Kosovo, Iraq, Israel, Indonesia or Northern Ireland. In each case, steadfast, if not zealous, refusal to be open to political negotiations which would allow mutual validation of the Other threatens the lives of millions of people and endangers peace in various global regions. Conversely, the ease with which traditions and practices have been commodified has displaced many distinct cultural practices from their origin and significance. For instance, the Navajo willingly produce replications of sand paintings (a part of their own

culture) for sale or appropriate icons of another culture (replications of Hopi Kachina dolls) for merchandising. Is such activity justified simply because they commodify their own cultural artifacts or the icons of a neighboring minority group?

Balme, Clifford and Schechner are among a large group who have highlighted the scholarly vexation. One cannot refrain from the pitfalls of the “gaze” but scholarly inquiry motivates us to continue to look and to learn about the Other while identifying our prejudices. Perhaps some guidance in resolving the problem can be found in the writings of Mahatma Gandhi. Speaking of making change in a social fabric that weaves together differing cultures, he said:

The golden rule of conduct . . . is mutual toleration, seeing that we will never all think alike and we shall always see Truth in fragment and from different angles of vision. Conscience is not the same thing for all . . . Even amongst the most conscientious persons, there will be room enough for honest differences of opinion. The only possible rule of conduct in any civilized society is, therefore, mutual toleration.<sup>4</sup>

This edition of PRAXIS is meant to continue the discourse. Three young scholars have approached cultural difference in performance in these essays first presented at last August’s Association for Theatre in Higher Education national conference. Deborah Klens-Bigman provides a fascinating introduction to Japanese *Nihon buyo*, a dance form little known outside Japan. Anita Gonzalez gives a most unique perspective of writing “between expectations” of Black/African, Latino and American. And James Frieze articulates what many of his peers may have experienced—negotiating between the theory and the practice of producing theatre.

## Notes

1. Jamake Highwater, *The Primal Mind: Vision and Reality in Indian America* (New York: Meridian, 1981).

2. See *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

3. See Schechner’s *Between Theatre and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1985) 80-91.

4. Raghavan N. Iyer, *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi* (New York: Oxford UP, 1973) 246.



Hanayagi Yoshigosaburo (left) as the distracted young lover in *Ni Nin Wankyu* at the 40th Annual *Gosaburo Kat* in Kobe, Japan, in 1992 (photo by Deborah Klens-Bigman).