

Johannes Fabian

TIME & THE OTHER

HOW ANTHROPOLOGY MAKES ITS OBJECT

Foreword by Matti Bunzl / With a New Postscript by the Author

Time and the Other

HOW ANTHROPOLOGY MAKES ITS OBJECT

Johannes Fabian



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Foreword / Syntheses of a Critical Anthropology

FIRST PUBLISHED IN 1983, Johannes Fabian's *Time and the Other* ranks among the most widely cited books of a critical anthropology that has, in the course of the past two decades, gradually moved into the center of the discipline. But like other canonical texts written in the tradition (cf. Clifford and Marcus 1986; Marcus and Fischer 1986; Clifford 1988; Rosaldo 1989), *Time and the Other* continues to hold theoretical relevance, retaining the radical flavor of an urgent polemic. Praised by many as a path-breaking critique of the anthropological project, while met with apprehension by others in light of its uncompromising epistemological stance, it has become a fixture in the theoretical landscape of contemporary anthropology. The following introduction leads from an exposition of the book's argument and an analysis of its relation to Fabian's earlier writings to its contextualization in the critical anthropology of the 1970s and early 1980s. The piece concludes with a brief overview of anthropological developments in the wake of the initial publication of *Time and the Other*.

The Argument

Time and the Other is a historical account of the constitutive function of time in Anglo-American and French anthropology. In contrast to prominent ethnographic accounts of culturally determined temporal systems (cf. Evans-Pritchard 1940; Bourdieu 1977), Fabian's critical project operates on a conceptual level, interrogating and problematizing the deployment and uses of time as such. In this sense, *Time and the Other* functions both as a meta-analysis of the anthropological project at large and as a deconstruction of its enabling temporal formations.

Fabian's argument is motivated by a contradiction inherent to the anthropological discipline: on the one hand, anthropological knowledge is produced in the course of fieldwork through the intersubjective communication between anthropologists and interlocutors; on the other hand, traditional forms of ethnographic representation require the constitutive suppression of the dialogical realities generating anthropological insights in the first place. In the objectifying discourses of a scientific anthropology, "Others" thus never appear as immediate partners in a cultural exchange but as spatially and, more importantly, temporally distanced groups. Fabian terms this discrepancy between the intersubjective realm of fieldwork and the diachronic relegation of the Other in anthropological texts the "schizogenic use of Time," and he explicates in the following manner:

I believe it can be shown that the anthropologist in the field often employs conceptions of Time quite different from those that inform reports on his findings. Furthermore, I will argue that a critical analysis of the role Time is allowed to play as a condition for producing ethnographic knowledge in the practice of fieldwork may serve as a starting point for a critique of anthropological discourse in general. (21)

In *Time and the Other*, the interrogation of the schizogenic use of time represents the beginning of a global critique of the anthropological project. For the discrepancy between

intersubjective fieldwork and the distancing rhetoric of ethnographic discourse leads Fabian to an understanding of anthropology as an inherently political discipline—a discipline that at once constitutes and demotes its objects through their temporal relegation. Fabian refers to this constitutive phenomenon as the “denial of coevalness”¹—a term that becomes the gloss for a situation where the Other’s hierarchically distancing localization suppresses the simultaneity and contemporaneity of the ethnographic encounter. The temporal structures so constituted thus place anthropologists and their readers in a privileged time frame, while banishing the Other to a stage of lesser development. This situation is ultimately exemplified by the deployment of such essentially temporal categories as “primitive” to establish and demarcate anthropology’s traditional object.

Fabian terms such denial of coevalness the “allochronism” of anthropology (32). At once the product of an entrenched ethnocentrism and the enabling ideology of traditional discourses about the Other, anthropology’s allochronic orientation emerges as the discipline’s central problematic. Fabian’s project in *Time and the Other* follows from this premise, fusing a critical genealogy of allochronic discourse in anthropology with a polemic against its unreflected reproduction.

Fabian presents his critique of allochronism in the context of a comprehensive analysis of the function of temporal systems in Western scientific discourses. In the first chapter of *Time and the Other*, he traces the transformation of time from the initial secularization of the Judeo-Christian notion of history during the Renaissance to its revolutionary naturalization in the course of the nineteenth century. Anthropology’s establishment as an autonomous discipline in the second half of the nineteenth century was predicated on this transformation. The discipline’s evolutionary doctrine—constituted at the intersection of scientific Enlightenment belief in progress, and colonially veiled ethnocentrism—in turn codified anthropology’s allochronic orientation. In this manner, contemporary “scientific” categorizations like “savage,” “barbaric,” and “civilized” signified stages of historical development. Conceiving global history in terms of universal progress, this allochronic logic identified and constituted late-nineteenth-century “savages” as “survivals”—inhabitants of more or less ancient states of cultural development. At the same time, anthropology’s allochronism established a “civilized” West as the pinnacle of universal human progress, an argument that helped to legitimize various imperialist projects.

Fabian views anthropology’s foundational allochronism as an ongoing problem. For the onset of antievolutionary paradigms in twentieth-century anthropology notwithstanding, he regards the relegation of the ethnographic object to another time as the constitutive element of the anthropological project at large. Fabian substantiates this thesis in [chapter 2](#) of *Time and the Other* through the analysis of two dominant theoretical orientations: Anglo-American cultural relativism and Lévi-Straussian structuralism. In these critical appraisals (followed [chapter 4](#) by a similar examination of symbolic anthropology), Fabian identifies the denial of coevalness and ethnographic intersubjectivity as constitutive elements of an anthropology that authorizes itself through the creation of global temporal hierarchies.

These deconstructive readings are corroborated in [chapters 3](#) and [4](#) by Fabian’s acute analyses of the strategic forms of representation and the epistemological foundations of allochronic discourse. In regard to the representation of the Other, Fabian identifies the “ethnographic present” (the “practice of giving accounts of other cultures and societies in the present tense” [80]) and the textually enforced elimination of the anthropologist

autobiographical voice as allochronism's central rhetorical figures. As Fabian shows, the ethnographic present indexes a dialogic reality—a reality, however, that is only realized in the communicative interaction between the anthropologist and his readers. The anthropological object remains excluded from this dialogue, despite its constitution at the intersubjective moment of fieldwork. In this context, Fabian identifies the ethnographic present as a rhetorical vehicle that reifies the Other as the inherently deindividuated object of the anthropologist's observation.

Much like the politically veiled deployment of the ethnographic present, the suppression of the anthropologist's autobiographical voice in scientific texts constitutes part of an allochronic pattern. In this connection, Fabian points to the anthropologist's manifest presence during fieldwork—a presence, however, whose undeniable effects on the very production of ethnographic knowledge remain unacknowledged in most anthropological texts. Through the distancing and objectifying depiction of a seemingly unaffected Other, anthropologists forgo the critical self-reflection that would render them a constitutive part of a hermeneutic (and thus "coeval") dialogue.

Fabian's interrogation of the epistemological basis of allochronic discourse returns him to his sweeping analysis of Western intellectual traditions. By way of astute interpretations of Ramin's pedagogy and Hegelian aesthetics, he identifies the "rhetoric of vision" as the privileged metaphor of a scientific anthropology. This sanctioning of the visual over the aural and oral, however, rests at the foundation of the allochronic predicament, for

As long as anthropology presents its object primarily as seen, as long as ethnographic knowledge is conceived primarily as observation and/or representation (in terms of models, symbol systems, and so forth) it is likely to persist in denying coevalness to its Other. (151–152)

Such sentences ultimately reveal the political agenda Fabian espouses in *Time and the Other*. Operating from a critical premise that figures anthropology, in light of its historical interconnection to imperialist domination, as an inherently compromised discipline,² Fabian regards allochronic discourse as a vehicle of Western domination, reproducing and legitimizing global inequities. In this context, Fabian's critique of anthropological allochronism emerges as an overtly political intervention, effectively identifying the rhetorical elements of temporal distancing—such as ethnographic depictions of the Other as "primitive" or "traditional"—as part and parcel of a (neo) colonial project.

Time and the Other seeks to confront this politically precarious dimension of the anthropological project; and, in this manner, Fabian ultimately advocates the renunciation of the allochronism he has identified as the constitutive element of traditional anthropological discourse. As a politically inflected scholarly act, such an epistemologically grounded and textually enacted renunciation would allow a genuinely coeval and veritably dialogical relationship between anthropology and its object.

In sketching the outlines of such a dialectical anthropology in [chapter 5](#), Fabian focuses on the dimension of social praxis. On the one hand, he presents this emphasis on praxis as an epistemological alternative to the allochronic rhetoric of vision (thereby refiguring previously observed objects as active partners in the anthropological endeavor); on the other hand, he demands the conceptual extension of the notion of praxis to the ethnographic moment of fieldwork itself. In this sense, he not only propagates the critical textual reflection of fieldwork as an intersubjective—and thus inherently dialogical—activity, but paves the way to a coeval

The Prehistory

Following its original publication in 1983, *Time and the Other* was praised as an original and important metacritique of the anthropological project (cf. Marcus 1984:1023–1025; Hansson 1984:597; Clifford 1986:101–102; Roche 1988:119–124). Indeed, Fabian's analyses of the ethnographic present, the suppression of the anthropologist's autobiographic voice, and the rhetoric of vision opened new vistas for critical anthropology. But it would be wrong to date the critical project Fabian articulated in *Time and the Other* with the year of the book's publication. By 1983, Fabian had grappled with the temporal dimension and dialogical quality of ethnographic knowledge for more than a decade. Many of the central themes of *Time and the Other* were, in fact, prefigured in the theoretical articles Fabian composed in the course of the 1970s—a corpus that, in turn, allows the delineation of the book's intellectual genealogy.

In this manner, a rudimentary analysis of ethnographic allochronism can be found in the 1972 piece “How Others Die—Reflections of the Anthropology of Death” (Fabian 1972; cf. Fabian 1991:xiii). It was on the occasion of this overview of the anthropological literature of death that Fabian initially criticized the unreflected tendency to construct and instrumentalize anthropological objects as embodiments of past times. As in his later analysis in *Time and the Other*, Fabian ascribed this tendency to anthropology's evolutionary heritage. Despite the predominance of antievolutionary currents in twentieth-century anthropology, the ethnography of death continued to understand its object as a window onto human antiquity:

“Primitive” reactions to death may then be consulted for the purpose of illuminating ontogenetic development with parallels from man's early history. Or, more frequently, we will find attempts to identify contemporary reactions to death, especially those that appear irrational, overly ritual and picturesque, as survivals of “archaic” forms. (Fabian 1972:179)

Even though primarily a critique of the existing anthropological literature, the article closes with guidelines for a conceptually progressive anthropology of death. In concise proposition Fabian spoke of the necessity for a communicative and praxis-based approach to ethnographic realities (Fabian 1972:186–188).

These demands, in turn, echoed conceptual and methodological considerations that had their origin in the critical reflection of his fieldwork. In 1966–1967, Fabian had undertaken ethnographic dissertation research on the religious Jamaa movement in the Shaba region of what was then Zaire.³ Initially under the influence of the Parsonian systems theory that had dominated his graduate education at the University of Chicago, Fabian quickly rejected the reigning anthropological doctrine, embarking on a search for new and critical epistemologies. Fabian developed the first formulation of an alternative model in the path-breaking article “Language, History and Anthropology” (1971b), a text that anticipated the basic stance of *Time and the Other* in central aspects (cf. 164–165).

Fabian's polemic in “Language, History and Anthropology” was directed against the hegemonic “positivist-pragmatist” philosophy of the human sciences (1971b:3). In Fabian's dictum, that orientation was marked by an uncritical, antireflexive posture that, on the one hand, derived sociological and anthropological insights from testable hypotheses and

abstractly generated theoretical models, and, on the other hand, equated the relevance of such knowledge with its explanatory value vis-à-vis divergent bodies of data.⁴ To Fabian, such an approach was grounded in a naïve, pre-Kantian metaphysics that promised the discovery of objective truths through the deployment of formalized and standardized methodologies (3–4). Especially in the context of ethnographic fieldwork, such a mode of scientific operation was deeply problematic, requiring the negation of constitutive subjective factors:

The positivist-pragmatist ethos calls for a conscious ascetic withdrawal as the result of which the scientist should be free from any “subjective” involvement as well as from the commonsense immediacy of the phenomena. The researcher attains objectivity by surrendering to a “theory,” a set of propositions chosen and interrelated according to the rules of a super-individual logic, and by subsuming under this theory those data of the external world which he can retrieve by means of the established procedures of his craft. (7)

But such a positivistic premise required the continuous suppression of a critical epistemology that would recognize the production of ethnographic knowledge as an inherently interactive and thus entirely context-dependent activity.

This problematic appeared in an especially acute form in the ethnographic situation of Fabian’s fieldwork among the members of the Jamaa movement. A positivist approach would have required a theory capable of organizing the observed phenomena. Although Max Weber’s charisma theory was available, Fabian noticed early on the inherent difficulties of a positivist ethnography of the Jamaa movement.⁵ These difficulties rested, on the one hand, on the ethnic and social diversity of its adherents (which made it impossible to treat the movement as characteristic of a clearly defined group), and, on the other hand, on the unprepossessing, unspectacular religious activities. The absence of a traditional collective object, as well as of ascertainable rituals, symbols, political, and economic elements, allowed Fabian only one means of accessing ethnographic information: the linguistic method of intersubjective communication (22–26).

Two years after the completion of his dissertation, Fabian’s “Language, History and Anthropology” presented his attempt to create a conscious epistemological basis for a nonpositivist, communicative anthropology. In this process, Fabian was influenced by the German *Positivismusstreit* and especially by Jürgen Habermas. He based his work further on Wilhelm von Humboldt’s hermeneutic philosophy of language as a model for a linguistically grounded, inter-subjective epistemology. Above all, contemporaneous trends in linguistic anthropology reinforced Fabian’s idea, especially papers by Dell Hymes on the “ethnography of communication” (cf. Hymes 1964). There Fabian found an ethnographic model of intersubjective objectivity—a model that proposed intersubjective processes, rather than given rules or norms, as the key to social behavior of members of a culture (Fabian 1971b:17).

Building on Hymes, Fabian expanded the analytic and epistemological question of intersubjective objectivity to one that centered on the “ethnographer and his subject” (18). He suggested that anthropological fieldwork could be understood as an always already communicative activity grounded in language. Accordingly, in a radical break from their current understandings, ethnographic knowledge could rest solely on intersubjective realities. Fabian formulated this epistemology in two theses:

1. In anthropological investigations, objectivity lies neither in the logical consistency of a theory, nor in the givenness of data, but in the foundation (*Begründung*) of human *intersubjectivity*. (9, emphases in original)

2. *Objectivity* in anthropological investigations is attained by entering a context of communicative interaction through the medium which represents *and* constitutes such a context: *language*. (12, emphases in original)
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In “Language, History and Anthropology,” Fabian had already begun to elucidate the wide ranging consequences of such an intersubjective anthropological epistemology (which became the basis of his critique in *Time and the Other*). The conception of fieldwork as continuing interactive communication thus contained not only the model of a genuinely dialogical anthropology but also the dialectical element of a theory of self-reflexive ethnographic praxis.

Understanding based on dialectical epistemology is always problematic-critical, for the simple reason that the very first step in the constitution of knowledge implies a radical reflection on the student's involvement in the communicative context to which the phenomena under investigation belong. (20)

Thus, a dialectical anthropology would never claim the political innocence of a positivistic epistemology. Before the backdrop of a post- and neo colonial world, anthropology appeared as a rather questionable political act, a circumstance that only intensified the need for a dialectical conception of ethnography as intersubjective praxis (27–28).

The path from “Language, History and Anthropology” to *Time and the Other* was thus sketched out. In between came a series of other theoretical contributions in which Fabian's analyses of his ethnographic insights anticipated many of the themes of *Time and the Other* (Fabian 1974; 1975; 1979). Since its initial publication, the book has sometimes been criticized as too abstract and “unethnographic”; in the context of its prehistory, however, it emerges as a constitutive part of Fabian's work on the Jamaa movement (cf. Fabian 1990a). In the final analysis, *Time and the Other* was part of the dialectical project that found its theoretical beginning in “Language, History, and Anthropology” and that at the same time not only demanded but also demonstrated the direct connection between anthropological theory and ethnographic praxis.

The Intellectual Context

Time and the Other was not just the consequence of Fabian's personal intellectual development. It was also part and product of a critical anthropology that markedly altered and reshaped the discipline during the 1970s and early 1980s. This critical anthropology, in turn, had its roots in reactions to the political and social realities of the late 1960s. The postcolonial independence movements in the Third World, the neoimperialist war in Vietnam, as well as the civil rights and student movements, could not leave unaffected a scientific discipline whose seemingly self-evident objects were the Others of a Western Self. At the conferences of the American Anthropological Association in the late 1960s, debates about the ethical and political responsibilities of anthropology arose, particularly in regard to the colonial power structures that had engendered the discipline in the first place and continued to sustain it in the context of neocolonial relations (cf. Gough 1968; Leclerc 1972; Asad 1973; Weaver 1973). These discussions were subsequently conducted in the pages of established publications like *Current Anthropology* and the *Newsletter of the American Anthropological Association*. The following years not only witnessed the forceful call for anthropology's “reinvention” (Hymes 1972a) but also the establishment of radical periodicals along these lines, such as *Critical Anthropology* (1970–1972), *Dialectical Anthropology* (1975 ff.), and *Critique of Anthropology* (1980 ff.).

However much the positions articulated in this context differed in their particulars, they nonetheless shared a common opponent: the assumptions and practices of a hegemonic anthropological project. Committed to a liberal humanism, that project was based on the positivist belief in an unpolitical, unbiased science, whose objectivity was ensured through distanced neutrality. The constitutive analytical instrument of this anthropology was the foundational concept of a relativism that proclaimed the fundamental equality of all cultural manifestations.

The critique of this position, which dominated the cultural orientation of American anthropology, the structural-functionalist approach of British social anthropology, and—with certain exceptions—the French varieties of structuralism, was carried out from scientific as well as political perspectives. Appealing to recent arguments in the history and philosophy of science, especially Thomas Kuhn's theses on scientific paradigms (Kuhn 1962), critics like Bob Scholte argued against the possibility of a neutral and value-free anthropology. As a discipline rooted in concrete social and cultural power structures, anthropology could no more shut out political influences than any other fields of inquiry. In the case of anthropology, however, the situation was particularly precarious given that the relevant political context of its codification was the imperialist expansion of the Western world—a reality whose structural consequences enabled the anthropological production of knowledge, both in post- and neocolonial situations (Scholte 1970; 1971; 1972). In view of the continuing repression of anthropology's traditional "objects," the discipline's distancing objectification not only ceased to figure as an unpolitical scientific act, but it came to be seen as part of an aggressive colonial project that secured the West's privileges at the costs of its Others. In this sense, the maxim of cultural relativism, with its profession of a value-free plurality, were little more than the hypocritical cloaking of a claim to hegemony that allowed examination of the peoples of the world with benevolent condescension while failing to acknowledge or thematize their subjugation by Western powers (cf. Scholte 1971; Diamond 1972; Weaver 1973).

Alongside criticism of the political dimensions of social and cultural anthropology, opposition arose against the reigning epistemologies of anthropological knowledge production. Fabian's article "Language, History and Anthropology" (an original draft was tellingly entitled "Language, History and a New Anthropology") was one of the central texts of this opposition. Fabian, like Scholte, criticized the positivist focus on anthropological methodology and the concomitant absence of reflection on the discipline's praxis (Fabian 1971b). For both critics, the ready and seemingly unproblematic objectification of Others (for example, as experimental objects of anthropological hypotheses or as the embodiments of cultural types) figured as a particularly questionable form of scientific imperialism, as it granted anthropologists unlimited and decontextualized control over data gained from the intercultural reality of ethnographic fieldwork. Such a positivist approach not only evaded critical reflection on relevant cultural and social contexts, but it also denied the Other the status of a subject who acts and interacts with the ethnographer.⁶

In turn, such critiques of ethnographic positivism served as the basis for the formulation of a new, critical anthropology. At the center of this new anthropology stood the demand for a politically relevant, morally responsible, and socially emancipatory direction. In place of the objectifying distance that reproduced neocolonial oppressions of the West's Others, there would be a new form of ethnographic immanence, grounded in the intersubjective experience and solidarity with the victims of imperialism (Hymes 1972b; Berreman 1972; Scholte 197

1972; Weaver 1973).

The epistemological basis of such a critical anthropology lay in the radical self-reflection on all aspects of ethnographic praxis. In this sense, Scholte demanded not only the critical reevaluation of anthropology's disciplinary history as an always already politically veiled activity, but the formulation of a self-consciously antipositivist, reflexive program of anthropological knowledge production (Scholte 1971; 1972). Much like Fabian had articulated in "Language, History and Anthropology," the core of this program was a vision of ethnographic fieldwork as an intersubjective and hence inherently hermeneutic praxis. Such praxis broke the analytic hegemony of the Western subject, replacing it with a conception of anthropological knowledge as the dialogical product of concretely situated communicative understanding. As a dialectical undertaking, it was thus part of an intersubjective totality that not only suspended the distinction between a researching Self and a researched Other but sought its permanent transcendence. In place of objectifying relativism, anthropology would follow an emancipatory ideal that understood and reflected the insights of ethnography as progressive and political tools (Scholte 1972; Fabian 1971b).

In the wake of the theoretical manifestos of the early 1970s, several scholars sought to enact the postulates in an effort to advance the project of critical anthropology. Such designs as Paul Rabinow's systematic reflections on his fieldwork in Morocco, as well as Kevin Dwyer's and Vincent Crapanzano's attempts—also based on Moroccan material—to develop dialogic ethnography, date from that period (Rabinow 1977; Dwyer 1979; 1982; Crapanzano 1980; cf. Tedlock 1979). Fabian's *Time and the Other*, whose composition dates back to 1978, emerged at the same moment, and it constituted a seminal, even defining, contribution to the emerging tradition. The book's wide-ranging criticism of allochronism as a constitutive element of anthropological discourse was both a meta-analysis of the discipline based on the principles of critical anthropology and a dialectic attempt at its *Aufhebung* through the demand for a reflexive ethnographic praxis.

At the same time, Fabian linked his investigation of allochronism to a powerful analysis of the discipline's rhetorical figures. This path-breaking critique of the discursive construction of the anthropological object aligned the emancipatory claims of critical anthropology with post-structural investigations into the representation of the Other. For Fabian, Michel Foucault's interventions functioned as an important inspiration—a clear parallel to Edward Said's concurrent analysis of "Orientalism" that similarly focused on the discursive formations that imagined, packaged, and fixed the Orient as a sign of the Other in Western texts (Said 1978). Fabian himself noted "similarities in intent [and] method" between the two books (xiii). Much like *Orientalism*, *Time and the Other* represented the synthesis of a politically progressive and radically reflexive epistemology with a critical analysis of the rhetorical elements of textual production; and in light of its focus on ethnography, it constituted a crucial step on the way to *Writing Culture*, arguably the most influential book in turn-of-the-century American anthropology (Clifford and Marcus 1986; cf. Marcus and Cushman 1982; Clifford 1983).

The Consequences

The theoretical and practical effects of *Time and the Other* can be traced readily in Fabian's own works, for example in two books from the 1990s—*Power and Performance* (1990b) and

Remembering the Present (1996). Both texts are characterized by the attempt to overcome the allochronic dimension of anthropology. In *Power and Performance*, Fabian attains ethnographic coevalness through the development of a performative dialectic: anthropological knowledge is not only the discursive representation of cultural facts; it is also, and more importantly, constructed from and within the conditions of fieldwork. Concretely, Fabian investigates the various dimensions of a theater production in 1986—a production that, as Fabian's self-reflexive analysis makes clear, could only take place because of his own presence. The ethnographic and analytic result of this situation underscores the central function of anthropological coevalness by portraying observed reality itself as a constitutive moment of fieldwork.

Fabian pursues a similarly path-breaking ontology of anthropological knowledge production in *Remembering the Present*. Here too the overcoming of allochronism is the central focus, and, as in *Power and Performance*, the accordance of coevalness results from the mobilization and representation of the ethnographic dialogue as a constitutive element of cultural production. Here, however, it is not actors who converse with the anthropologist and his readers but rather an artist, Tshibumba Kanda Matulu. In the 1970s, Fabian encouraged him to depict the history of Zaire. The reproduction of the resulting 101 paintings, along with the artist's descriptions of them, constitute the main part of the book. In its radical extension of anthropological authority, *Remembering the Present* thus exemplifies a concrete attempt not only to deconstruct allochronic methods of representation in anthropology but also to replace them with constructive alternatives.⁷

Beyond the expected conclusion that *Time and the Other* figured as a conceptual signpost for Fabian's later work, it is quite difficult to prove the book's concrete influences on general tendencies in anthropology. Not only are the origins of individual ideas notoriously difficult to pin down, but their fragmented history precludes any continuous delineation (cf. Stocking 1968:94). Such a project would also be a contradiction of the argument, developed so prominently in *Time and the Other*, that anthropology is both a collective and context-bound project. In this situation, the central conception of *Time and the Other*—anthropology as praxis—offers an essential aid, as it directs attention to the effective production of ethnographic knowledge, “what its practitioners actually do” (Geertz 1973:5). In this regard, the question of the influence of *Time and the Other* may be posed more meaningfully: Has allochronism been transcended in anthropological discourse?

Even a cursory glance at some of the more influential ethnographies published in the past fifteen years can elucidate this question. Overwhelmingly, contemporary anthropological work follows *Time and the Other* in the deployment of pertinent methodological and rhetorical conventions. The consistent refusal of the traditional, objectifying ethnographic present, for example, is striking, as is its replacement by the imperfect as the preferred tense in the narrative representation of ethnographic material. The use of the past tense, moreover, occurs in direct opposition to the danger of allochronic representation, signaling instead contemporary anthropologists' widespread desire to historicize and particularize the ethnographic encounters. As a result, anthropological knowledge now appears as the product of specifically situated, dialogical interactions between anthropologists and informants, further highlighted by the widespread appearance of the authorial “I.” The constitutive organ of ethnographic intersubjectivity, it is now typically present, functioning as the principal carrier of anthropological coevalness and reflexive praxis.

Anna Tsing's *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen* (1993)—one of the most widely hailed and emulated ethnographies of the 1990s—illustrates these principles paradigmatically. The book is in many respects a “classic” monograph of a small indigenous group, the Meratus Dayaks, who live in near isolation in the southeast of the Indonesian part of Borneo. In distinction from conventional descriptions, however, Tsing does not take the relative isolation of the group as a given, but rather analyzes its structure. The result is a complex interpretation of the production of marginality in the national context of the Indonesian state. In this way, the cultural existence of the Meratus Dayaks appears not as a remnant of “primitive” ways of life but as a function of national and transnational power structures. Indeed, Tsing resolutely protests the allochronic assumption that the Meratus Dayaks are “anybody’s ‘contemporary ancestors’” (Tsing 1993:x); moreover, her rhetorical strategies strive for the constant transmission of coevalness. Through the use of innovative narrative approaches (a creative symbiosis of analytical and reflexive elements), the concrete dialogical dimensions of her fieldwork remain accessible. Informants thus become complex and grounded subjects, and to ensure this mode of representation, the question of grammatical temporality takes center-stage:

In what tense does one write an ethnographic account? This grammatical detail has considerable intellectual and political significance. The use of the “ethnographic present” is tied to a conceptualization of culture as a coherent and persistent whole. It creates a timeless scene of action in which cultural difference can be explored (cf. Strathern 1990; Hastrup 1990). This removal of ethnographic time from history has been criticized for turning ethnographic subjects into exotic creatures (Fabian 1983); their time is not the time of civilized history. Many ethnographers are thus turning to a historical time frame in which action happens in the past tense.

Yet, here too, there are problems in describing an out-of-the-way place.... To many readers, using the past tense about an out-of-the-way place suggests not that people “have” history but that they are history, in the colloquial sense ...

I cannot escape these dilemmas; I can only maneuver within them. In this book, I find uses for both the historical past and the ethnographic present. I am inconsistent. Sometimes I use tenses in a counter-intuitive style to disrupt problematic assumptions. For example, in [chapter 3](#), I put my entire discussion of Meratus gender expectations in the historical framework of developments in the early 1980s. I am working against accounts of timeless and unmovable gender systems. In contrast, in chapter 9, my account of Uma Adang's [Tsing's main interlocutor's] social movement, which I also encountered in the early 1980s, is written in the present tense; since I do not know what has happened to her in the 1990s, my goal here is to keep open the possibilities and dreams that her movement stimulated. (Tsing 1993:xiv–xv, emphasis in original)

From this example of ethnographic reflection, the importance of *Time and the Other* for later developments in anthropology becomes quite clear. Tsing's conscious choice of grammatical temporality is based in a reflexive epistemology that constantly probes the modes of ethnographic knowledge production. In this sense, it is of less relevance whether Tsing's use of the present tense corresponds to the specific formulations of *Time and the Other*. What is more telling is the critical reflection on the political and intellectual dimension of temporal rhetoric, as well as the search for nonallochronic strategies of affirmative ethnographic representation—both of which follow Fabian's project extremely closely.

Similar statements could not only be culled from other contemporary monographs, but they are in evidence throughout the academic field of Anglo-American anthropology. And much like in the case of Tsing, the question of ethnographic temporality poses itself not only from a grammatical, but also from a political and epistemological, viewpoint. This collective stance is centrally the result of Fabian's intervention. Since *Time and the Other*, the tempor

depiction of the Other is no longer an unproblematic aspect of ethnographic texts but rather constitutive criterion of a critical and reflexive anthropology that has come to define the mainstream of the discipline.⁸

At the turn of the century, the intersubjective coevalness of anthropological Self and ethnographic Other is no longer in question. There are indications, however, for an even more lasting *Aufhebung* of the traditional configurations. For scholars like Arjun Appadurai and Ulf Hannerz, the global dimensions of cultural developments are at the center of anthropological inquiry (Appadurai 1996; Hannerz 1992; 1996), and, as such, their ethnographic descriptions require the development of concepts that can grasp and render the complex coevalness of cultural realities. Appadurai famously identifies five dimensions in this context—the “ethnoscapes,” “mediascapes,” “technoscapes,” “financescapes,” and “ideoscapes” that configure transnational fields and their cultural flows (Appadurai 1996:33–36). Like other anthropologists concerned with transnational processes, Appadurai and Hannerz see all of the world’s groups as part of the global integration effected by late capitalism, a circumstance that not only renews attention to power differentials but necessitates the effective abandonment of particularized investigations of supposedly isolated peoples. As Hannerz asserts, there is no “really distant Other,” no “Primitive Man,” in the “global ecumene” but only combinations and continuities from “direct and mediated engagements” (Hannerz 1996:11).

The allochronic relegation of the Other is challenged even more fundamentally by the recent emergence of a theoretically ambitious, reflexive native anthropology. While *Time and the Other*—as a theoretical reflection on Fabian’s fieldwork in Africa—takes the ethnographic reality of a Western Self vis-à-vis a non-Western Other as its operative assumption, the proponents of a critical “native anthropology” have complicated this situation in radical ways. Formerly produced at the margins of the discipline as “indigenous anthropologists,” they have thus come to function as an important corrective against the reification of anthropology’s Self/Other dyad in terms of the West/non-West dichotomy. Such “native anthropologists” as Kirin Narayan and Kath Weston, moreover, have demonstrated that anthropological research in one’s own cultural field presupposes the negotiation of binary oppositions in ways that are similar to “traditional” ethnographic settings (Narayan 1993; Weston 1997). In this manner they have suggested that all anthropological fieldwork is based on forms of intersubjective communication that cross constitutive boundaries—an insight that might lead to the practical deconstruction of the ontological distinction between Western, scientific Self and non-Western, ethnographic Other. In taking the argument of *Time and the Other* to its ultimate conclusion, the result of this deconstruction would be an anthropology that is no longer defined as the science of non-Western Others (however progressively reformed) but as a discipline grounded in sustained, intersubjective fieldwork (cf. Gupta and Ferguson 1997).

Both the established status of a critical, reflexive anthropology and the current theoretical and methodological trends of a “transnational” or “native anthropology” provide hope for an enduring end of allochronism in anthropology. We are not yet to this point, without even mentioning the political realities of allochronic rhetoric and the production of knowledge in other areas (from journalism to macroeconomics). In this sense, Johannes Fabian’s *Time and the Other* represents not only a milestone in the history of anthropological theory and practice but also a very timely contribution to ideas of the Other in the social sciences and in the public imagination.

In its initial instantiation, this introduction was written and published in German (cf. Bunzl 1998). The present text is a revised and slightly expanded version of the original, which was translated into English by Amy Blau.

Notes

1. Fabian deploys the designation “coevalness” in order to merge into one Anglicized term the German notion “*Gleichzeitigkeit*,” a phenomenological category that denotes both contemporaneity and synchronicity/simultaneity (31).

2. As Fabian puts it, “Existentially and politically, critique of anthropology starts with the scandal of domination and exploitation of one part of mankind by another” (Fabian 1983:x).

3. Fabian earned his doctorate from the University of Chicago in 1969 with a dissertation entitled *Charisma and Cultural Change*, which was published in revised form as a monograph two years later (cf. Fabian 1969; 1971a).

4. Over the years, Fabian’s opposition against a positivist-pragmatist philosophy of science has turned into a critique of positivism—a reflection of his gradually developed appreciation for certain pragmatist orientations (Fabian 1991:xii).

5. The Jamaa movement was founded by the Belgian missionary Placide Tempels. The author of “La philosophie bantoue” (1945), a book important for many African independence movements, Tempels began to preach Christianity in terms of his “Bantu philosophy” in the 1950s. The message was well received among industrial workers in the copper mines of the Shaba region. Although they never broke completely with the Catholic church, Tempels’s followers considered themselves an independent group—the name “Jamaa” means “family” in Swahili (cf. Fabian 1971b).

6. In view of this radical redefinition of the anthropological project, the extreme reaction of established anthropology was hardly surprising. Above all, the publication of “Reinventing Anthropology” caused enormous controversy (cf. Scholte 1978). In 1976 Fabian himself became the main target of a polemic in the central organ of the anthropological profession (Jarvie 1975; cf. Fabian 1976).

7. In his recent book *Moments of Freedom: Anthropology and Popular Culture* (1998), Fabian has extended his project to an even more general investigation of cultural formations, demonstrating how allochronic conceptions have obscured the contemporaneity of African popular culture. In another recent book, *Out of Our Minds: Reason and Madness in the Exploration of Central Africa* (2000), Fabian returns to a genealogical investigation of Africa’s construction in the Western imagination, finding surprising traces of intersubjectivity in texts from the turn of the twentieth century.

8. Numerous contemporary ethnographies grapple with the question of the anthropological object’s temporal representation, and nearly all of them reference *Time and the Other* as the central text in this regard. A highly incomplete list of important recent ethnographies that are indebted to Fabian’s work in this manner includes: Ann Anagnost, *National Past-Times: Narrative, Representation, and Power in Modern China* (1997); Daphne Berdahl, *Where the World Ended: Re-Unification and Identity in the German Borderland* (1999); John Borneman, *Belonging in the Two Berlins: Kin, State, Nation* (1992); Fernando Coronil, *The Magical State: Nature, Money, and Modernity in Venezuela* (1997); Kenneth George, *Showing Signs of Violence: The Cultural Politics of a Twentieth-Century Headhunting Ritual* (1996); Akhil Gupta, *Postcolonial Developments: Agriculture in the Making of Modern India* (1998); Matthew Gutmann, *The Meaning of Macho: Being a Man in Mexico City* (1996); Marilyn Ivy, *Discourses of the Vanishing: Modernity, Phantasm, Japan* (1995); Liisa Malkki, *Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory, and National Cosmology Among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania* (1995); Rosalind Morris, *In Place of Origins: Modernity and Its Mediums in Thailand* (2000); Elizabeth Povinelli, *Labor’s Lot: The Power, History, and Culture of Aboriginal Action* (1993); Lisa Rofel, *Other Modernities: Gendered Yearnings in China After Socialism* (1999); Mary Steedly, *Hanging Without a Rope: Narrative Experience in Colonial and Postcolonial Karoland* (1993); Kathleen Stewart, *A Space on the Side of the Road: Cultural Poetics in an “Other” America* (1996).

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Preface to the Reprint Edition

MORE THAN TWENTY YEARS AGO, the manuscript of this book (completed in 1978) made its rounds among publishers. Some readers felt that it was too ambitious, touching on too many issues without developing them in depth, formulating an argument that was often difficult to follow. One of them thought it came “perilously close to denying the possibility of any anthropology.” Three presses rejected the manuscript. One editor, after a long process of repeated evaluations, promised acceptance, provided I would make at least some of the revisions that critics had recommended. I refused and retracted. Every one of the essays that were presented as steps of a coherent argument had by then been rewritten at least three times. This was the best I could do. Walter Ong supported my resolve to stick to the text when he wrote (in his report to one of the presses): “Because the thinking is so fresh and comprehensive, it demands learning and high intelligence of the reader. I do not believe it can be made notably simpler and still remain effective.”

I confess that I never felt secure about this attempt to take on an entire discipline. Often I told myself and my friends that I had written *Time and the Other* more with my guts than with my brain. It was, as one reader observed much later, a *cri de coeur*. An outcry that seems to have been heard and heeded, I feel now (and hope this will not be dismissed as a sign of conceit), should not and cannot be “improved” by updating and revisions. Therefore the original text remains unchanged in this edition.

By all indications, *Time and the Other* became a success, possibly less in anthropology than in several fields that had grown accustomed to leaning on anthropology for their own projects. It was, however, a success that came to haunt me when, again and again, I seem to get identified with this one book.

Already in the preface to the original edition I insisted that it was never meant to be read as a self-contained theoretical treatise. It grew out of my ordinary preoccupations as a teacher and ethnographer, I said, and meant that it should speak to such ordinary preoccupations in the future. As far as my subsequent work is concerned, after *Time and the Other* I knew that would have to “put up or shut up.” The many books and articles that followed show that, contrary to the fears some readers expressed, this critique of anthropology made it possible for me to continue with old ethnographic (and later historical) projects and to take up new ones. Especially two collections of essays and a recent critique of the field in the guise of a work on the scientific exploration of Central Africa toward the end of the nineteenth century can be consulted by those who would like to know more about what I claim to have been the practical context of *Time and the Other* and where I stand now (Fabian 1991, 2000, 2001).

I consider it a great privilege (and compliment) that a young historian of anthropology consented to having his appraisal of *Time and the Other* published as a new introduction to this reprint edition. Matti Bunzl’s essay (originally written in German for a translation of the book that never materialized) provides the kind of detached and informative guidance that cannot be given by the author.

My gratitude is due, again, to Walter Ong, Edward Said, and Charles Webel, editor of the first edition, who persuaded Columbia University Press to publish *Time and the Other*. I thank John Michel and Wendy Lochner, who prepared the way for this reprint edition and saw through production.

Xanten
June 2001

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Preface and Acknowledgments

"You see, my friend," Mr. Bounderby put in, "we are the kind of people who know the value of time, and you are the kind of people who don't know the value of time." "I have not," retorted Mr. Childers, after surveying him from head to foot, "the honour of knowing you—but if you mean that you can make more money of your time than I can of mine, I should judge from your appearance that you are about right."

Charles Dickens, *Hard Times*

WHEN THEY APPROACH the problem of Time, certain philosophers feel the need to fortify themselves with a ritual incantation. They quote Augustine: "What is time? If no one asks me about it, I know; if I want to explain it to the one who asks, I don't know" (*Confessions*, book XI). In fact, I have just joined that chorus.

It is difficult to speak about Time and we may leave it to philosophers to ponder the reasons. It is not difficult to show that we speak, fluently and profusely, *through* Time. Time, much like language or money, is a carrier of significance, a form through which we define the content of relations between the Self and the Other. Moreover—as the conversation between Mr. Bounderby, the factory owner, and Mr. Childers, the acrobat, reminds us—Time may give form to relations of power and inequality under the conditions of capitalist industrial production.

It occurred to me that this could be the perspective for a critique of cultural anthropology. These essays, then, are offered as studies of "anthropology through Time." The reader who expects a book on the anthropology of Time—perhaps an ethnography of "time-reckoning among the primitives"—will be disappointed. Aside from occasional references to anthropological studies of cultural conceptions of Time, he will find nothing to satisfy his curiosity about the Time of the Other. I want to examine past and present uses of Time as ways of construing the object of our discipline. If it is true that Time belongs to the political economy of relations between individuals, classes, and nations, then the construction of anthropology's object through temporal concepts and devices is a political act; there is "Politics of Time."

I took an historical approach in order to demonstrate the emergence, transformation, and differentiation of uses of Time. This runs counter to a kind of critical philosophy which condemns recourse to history as a misuse of Time. According to a famous remark by Karl Popper, "The historicist does not recognize that it is we who select and order the facts of history" (1966 2:269). Popper and other theorists of science inspired by him do not seem to realize that the problematic element in this assertion is not the constitution of history (whom doubts that it is made, not given?) but the nature of the *we*. From the point of view of anthropology, that *we*, the subject of history, cannot be presupposed or left implicit. Nor should we let anthropology simply be used as the provider of a convenient Other to the *we* (as exemplified by Popper on the first page of the *Open Society* where "our civilization" is opposed to the "tribal" or "closed society," 1966 1:1).

Critical philosophy must inquire into the dialectical constitution of the Other. To consider

that relation dialectically means to recognize its concrete temporal, historical, and political conditions. Existentially and politically, critique of anthropology starts with the scandal of domination and exploitation of one part of mankind by another. Trying to make sense of what happens—in order to overcome a state of affairs we have long recognized as scandalous—we can in the end not be satisfied with explanations which ascribe Western imperialism in abstract terms to the mechanics of power or aggression, or in moral terms to greed and wickedness. Aggression, one suspects, is the alienated bourgeois' perception of his own sense of alienation as an inevitable, quasi-natural force; wickedness projects the same inevitability inside the person. In both cases, schemes of explanation are easily bent into ideologies of self-justification. I will be searching—and here I feel close to the Enlightenment *philosophes* whom I shall criticize later on—for an “error,” an intellectual misconception, a defect of reason which, even if it does not offer *the* explanation, may free our self-questioning from the double bind of fate and evil. That error causes our societies to maintain the anthropological knowledge of other societies in bad faith. We constantly need to cover up for a fundamental contradiction: On the one hand we dogmatically insist that anthropology rests on ethnographic research involving personal, prolonged interaction with the Other. But then we pronounce upon the knowledge gained from such research a discourse which construes the Other in terms of distance, spatial and temporal. The Other's empirical presence turns into his theoretical absence, a conjuring trick which is worked with the help of an array of devices that have the common intent and function to keep the Other outside the Time of anthropology. An account of the many ways in which this has been done needs to be given, even if it is impossible to propose, in the end, more than hints and fragments of an alternative. The radical contemporaneity of mankind is a project. Theoretical reflection can identify obstacles; only changes in the praxis and politics of anthropological research and writing can contribute solutions to the problems that will be raised.

Such are the outlines of the argument I want to pursue. It lies in the nature of this undertaking that a great mass of material had to be covered, making it impossible always to do justice to an author or an issue. Readers who are less familiar with anthropology and its history might first want to look at the summary provided in [chapter 5](#).

I don't want to give the impression that this project was conceived principally by way of theoretical reasoning. On the contrary, it grew out of my ordinary occupations as a teacher working mainly in institutions involved in the reproduction of Western society, and as an ethnographer trying to understand cultural processes in urban-industrial Africa (see Fabian 1971, 1979). In the act of producing ethnographic knowledge, the problem of Time arises concretely and practically, and many anthropologists have been aware of the temporal aspects of ethnography. But we have rarely considered the ideological nature of temporal concepts which inform our theories and our rhetoric. Nor have we paid much attention to intersubjective Time, which does not measure but constitutes those practices of communication we customarily call fieldwork. Perhaps we need to protect ourselves by such lack of reflection in order to keep our knowledge of the Other at bay, as it were. After all, we only seem to be doing what other sciences exercise: keeping object and subject apart.

Throughout, I have tried to relate my arguments to existing work and to provide bibliographic references to further sources. W. Lepeyres' essay the “End of Natural History” (1976) is closely related to my views on the uses of Time in earlier phases of anthropology (although we seem to differ on what brought about the phenomenon of “temporalization”); I

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