

Reflections on the postcolonial novel: an interdisciplinary approach

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Abstract

The main objective of this paper is to propose an interdisciplinary reflection on how postcolonial fiction in English can help readers and scholars construct an idea of the post-colonial nation and the cultural identity of its people.

*This theory is part of a larger research project developed in my thesis *The Search for Identity and the Construction of an Idea of India in the novels of Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai* (2016). As discussed in this paper, national history, identity and cultural representation are the three aspects which through an analysis of different artistic production, including narratives are crucial to the building of knowledge on a nation, its culture and people. Historical processes are the key to the unfolding of present circumstances and fundamental to the construction of a national identity with a collective feel. However, the perceptions of the past change according to philosophical and ideological trends, placing historical objectivity in the hands of its subjective counterpart. It is cultural theory and how it evolves in simultaneity with the world and its social, political, economic and technological development that in effect dictates the forms and expressions that give shape to societies, nations and identities.*

The function of the narrative, whether as text, visual arts, film, architecture, dance and other creative expressions of the self, is to tell a story. And every moment of every living being can be told in a story. History too is a story. Though it originally focused on the grand deeds of the European nations, with postcolonialism new stories began to emerge, revealing a world of diversity and deconstructing traditional views of history and power relations. However, this new approach to the historical, cultural and political dialectic was achieved through the effect of the postcolonial narrative which used Western forms and structures, such as the novel and the English language to achieve its aim. This appropriation of language and form resulted in an inversion of power relations as a cultural metaphor.

For the purpose of this debate, the present paper focuses on the theory surrounding the postcolonial novel and is divided into three main sections: a historical approach, postcolonial theory and the relation between anthropology and fiction.

Keywords: Postcolonial literature, history, culture, social anthropology, identity studies, India.

The general aim of this paper is to examine the concept of the 'postcolonial' as it has been represented through the literature of former colonised nations. As I will argue, it is through the representation of the postcolonial identity in literature in its multiple forms, more specifically fiction of Indian writers in English, that readers, scholars and postcolonial subjects themselves are able to better construct an understanding of their history, culture and nation, as well as the transformations each of these aspects of their identity experienced, and continues to experience following independence and decolonization.

The extended theme of this discussion was the subject of my doctoral thesis entitled: *The Search for Identity and the Construction of an Idea of India in the novels of Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai* (2016) which analysed how postcolonial fiction in English can provide a passage way into the understanding of the history, culture and identity of a nation and its people. My research, as the title implies, focused on two novels by Indian female writers *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy published in 1997 and *The Inheritance of Loss* by Kiran Desai published in 2006.

From nations such as India which reconstructed itself following movements of decolonization and independence from the British Empire emerged a literature which has been essential to the definition of the post-colonial territory, its people and culture. Postcolonial literature has raised debates relevant for the analysis of the literary, cultural and national identity of nations such as India because of its form and what it implies through its form. This is a literature which has been characterised by the language employed in the writing, the references to its colonial heritage, the depiction of characters and spaces and the writing and rewriting of historical events. Because of the fact that the postcolonial nation, its literature, culture and people are not only portrayed through writing in English which complies to its predefined form of 'postcolonial literature' the ongoing debate on how it is possible to define a category that embraces the nation and its people as a whole is still today a highly relevant one.

According to Stephen Selmon and as stated in his paper, "Unsettling the Empire: Resistance Theory for the Second World" (1990) the idea of the postcolonial, as a field for the interpretation of social, cultural or political forms "has always been Second-World *literary* writing rather than Second-World *critical* writing which has occupied the vanguard of a Second-World post-colonial *literary* or *critical* theory" (Selmon 1990:102). Following on from this idea, and as I will discuss, it is the writing which fits into the category of 'postcolonial fiction' that has influenced much of the theory in this field of study whose scientific nature stretches from history to literature, also exploring changes in language, in society and its people, in the economy and politics of India and other forms of cultural and artistic expression. Over the decades, it is mainly writers who have been defining and re-defining the idea of the postcolonial form and postcolonialism as theory, and how reflections on these ideas also serves the concept of nation-building, but simultaneously writers have also been defining and redefining themselves, their literary form and their identity as Indian, diasporic and global.

The ideas in my thesis, and in this paper, are worked through an interdisciplinary approach to the texts, focusing on three main theoretical perspectives, which were the three

chapters into which I organized my dissertation. These aspects which I have considered most relevant for a discussion on this debate and into which I have organised this paper are a) history; b) postcolonial theory and c) anthropology. Although in my thesis I analyse literary and narrative aspects of the novels *The God of Small Things* (1997) by Arundhati Roy and *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) by Kiran Desai in greater detail, in this paper I am going to be mainly discussing theory and not the narratives themselves, even though references to specific passages from the novels are made and parts of the texts are quoted in support of my ideas.

It could be argued that the postcolonial novel because of what it is trying to portray, has a *tridimensional* role and form. By this term I mean that it is a work of fiction, an ethnography and a historical document. Therefore, these are the three theoretical perspectives through which I provide the basis for my interpretation of this literary form. In the theoretical approach I have developed, I apply these three perspectives to my discussion in the following ways. First, I look at how historical discourse, historical analysis and historical writing have shifted over the centuries adapting to new socio-cultural realities. Secondly, I explore how postcolonial theory has helped nations coming from a colonial past and the struggles of decolonization locate themselves on the global map creating the adequate space for cultural expression and an interpretation of its past, present and future. Thirdly, I explore the relationship between social anthropology and literature or more specifically between the ethnography and postcolonial fiction and the importance bridging these two disciplines has in cultural studies today.

However, I also propose the inverse: a construction of the history, of the post-colonial nation and its people and of the society and culture of India through an individual or personal experience and the subjectivities this involves, and naturally, through the creative power of fiction. Every history is also a story, and as such there are many possible interpretations, meanings and points of entry into the writing of events. In the two writers I chose to work on and in Rushdie's work, I found the literary support for the thesis I chose to defend. To quote Kiran Desai, "Never again could she think there was but one narrative and that this one narrative belonged only to herself, that she might create her own tiny happiness and live safely within it." (Desai 2006: 323). This citation endorses the idea that there are many different possibilities for an interpretation of any event and so many possible narratives and points of entry into the narrative. In the same line of thought, there are many possible narratives in the writing of any history, these stories are made up of personal experiences and perspectives, subjectivities, as I have called them which will be unique to each story-teller. In Arundhati Roy's words, "Little events, ordinary things, smashed and reconstituted. Imbued with new meaning. Suddenly they become the bleached bones of a story" (Roy 1997:33). History is also composed of the smaller events of everyday life and everyday people, including those who have been silenced over time or have not been allowed the opportunity to voice their experiences. And one final thought on this, it is not only the great events that give shape to history. In fact, it would be a very empty, vague and even inaccurate history if that were the case. History is also composed of fragments (the memories, experiences, stories) which are fundamental to the construction of our identity as individuals, and since, as human beings, our perception is incomplete (the cracked lens) and meaning is essential to life, we strive for coherence through the piecing together of those fragments. Rushdie illustrates this idea in this well-known quote:

But human beings do not perceive things whole; we are not gods but wounded creatures, cracked lenses, capable only of fractured perceptions. Partial beings, in all the senses of that phrase. Meaning is a shaky edifice we build out of scraps, dogmas, childhood injuries, newspaper articles, chance remarks, old films, small victories, people hated, people loved; perhaps it is because our sense of what is the case is constructed from such inadequate materials that we defend it so fiercely, even to the death. (Rushdie 2010:12)

As humans, we make sense of ourselves and our world at any given moment through the reconstruction of our experiences and past as meaningful within a broader context. The construction of a meaningful history, that which provides a structure for our present existence, is only possible through individual actions and experiences, as related to broader circumstances and contexts, and how these are interpreted individually and even reconstituted and reinterpreted through memory.

In the almost seventy years that have passed from the time of Independence in India, postcolonial writers have become agents for the global spread of Indian history, culture and identity. Recently, on August 5th 2017, *The Guardian* published an article entitled “Partition 70 years on: Salman Rushdie, Kamila Shamsie and other writers reflect” which supports the claim that writers are still important reference points for an understanding of the past, even if they did not experience it first-hand as in the case of Kiran Desai.

Fiction which is art has become an accepted form of depicting the postcolonial reality to a global audience (along with other art forms, practices and products, of course). As the demand and interest grew and continues to grow, for more, a market opened for this nation and its cultural metaphors. And along with the pleasure of reading these novels came the acquisition of knowledge of India leading to the creation of the academic and theoretical branch. Over the decades, postcolonialism has blossomed into a vibrant academic and theoretical field for research, and by now, well into the 21st century, it is inevitably beginning to raise debates of another nature that are necessary for the ongoing debate on how this historical fact has influenced the contemporary society undergoing constant social, cultural, economic and political changes, as I will go on to discuss further on in this paper.

Returning to the decades following the independence of India and the boom of postcolonial literature from this emerging nation and its people reconstructing their national and cultural identity, what characteristics did these novels possess that appealed to Western readers? To start, these narratives by writers such as Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai, Amitav Ghosh and others, were written in English, making them accessible as first-hand texts to the world, even though most did play with language and make use of linguistic devices that fuse Indian languages with English. This practice turned out to be a ‘trademark’ of much postcolonial and diasporic literature, not only of that which was of Indian origin, or of literature written in English¹. Postcolonial narratives challenged dominant discourses since although they did have a historical depth to their narrative content, it was mostly presented

¹ A good example of this is Dominican writer Junot Diaz’s novel *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* which fuses English with Spanish and with Dominican slang or creole.

through a subversive dimension. Memory, collective memory, family history and nostalgia were thoroughly explored and used in the reconstruction of the past and homeland. Therefore, these novels shed a new light on institutionalized ideas not only through a re-presentation and re-writing of history through a new form, but also by representing and giving voice to the experience of social and ethnic minorities (both creating and challenging stereotypes). With the rise of movements across borders and the settling of Indian nationals, and of other South East Asian countries, on new territories, these writers also began portraying hybridity, migration and other social realities of the contemporary society at home and in the host land. In sum, these narratives provided many global readers with subject matter they could relate to and so opening the market for “a pocket overview of twentieth-century Indian history” in the words of Kortenaar. (2004)

Although prior to Independence writers of the Indian subcontinent or of Indian descent were already writing in English, the dawn of this *movement* can be pin pointed to Salman Rushdie and his prize winning novel *Midnight's Children* (1981), and I quote *Granta* editor, Ian Jack in his introduction to the 2015 commemorative edition dedicated to India,

In 1980 Anita Desai became the first India-born and India-domiciled writer to have a novel selected for the Booker shortlist, her *Clear Light of Day*, but the big change came after Salman Rushdie published *Midnight's Children* the following year. The charge could be laid against him that, as a product of an English private school and an ancient English university who had settled in London, he too was an outsider. But he had grown up in Bombay and didn't approach his subject with a stranger's eye. A new post-imperial generation recognized themselves in a novel that brilliantly evoked the India in which they'd come of age, and its worldwide success encouraged young Indian writers to see that their country not only offered important things to describe but also that they might be the best people to describe them. (Granta 2015: 9-10)

What were the historical processes that led to the space created for the Indian postcolonial novel in English as a representation of the nation and culture? As analysed in greater depth in the first chapter of my thesis, it is possible to identify shifting ideologies from Orientalism, where ethnographic and historical records of India were voiced through British imperialism and philosophical perspectives which dominated in the 18th and 19th centuries, to Re-Orientalism, a term used by Lisa Lau and Ana Mendes (2011) to classify how Orientals have been defining, or re-defining the orient in a post-colonial context. Indian literature in English, as other postcolonial literatures ‘carved out’ a space for itself redefining the fictional narrative as a national allegory or postmodern ethnography, or what Tyler has called an ‘evocation’. (Tyler, 1986)

Postcolonialism which I like to consider not only as an era that proceeded colonialism, but also as the cultural space where new narratives emerge through the re-ordering and reassessment of culture and identity within a more global ideal, is the second theoretical approach I developed in my thesis. According to anthropologist Marshall Sahlins, cultural systems can only remain authentic by existing outside historical time. (Sahlins, 1995) In the same way, historical circumstances will have no effect on a culture unless they

cause a break and reconnection in the system. Furthermore, the course of history is also in the hands of individuals who have the agency to transform culturally imposed structures.

It seemed that history had to be kept at a distance, lest “system” be put at risk. As I say, action entered into account only as it represented the working out of an established order, the “stereotypic reproduction” (Godelier’s phrase) of existing cultural categories. This nonhistorical appropriation of action could be supported, moreover, by the sound argument that circumstances have no existence or effect in culture except as they are interpreted. And interpretation is, after all, classification within a given category. “It is not enough to say,” the philosopher tells us, “that one is conscious of something; one is conscious of something as being something” (Percy 1958:638, emphases added). The percept becomes a fact of human consciousness – or at least of social communication – insofar as it is embedded in a concept of which the perceiver is not the author. The concept is motivated in the culture as constituted. (Sahlins 1995:7)

Colonialism awoke in the indigenous subject a collective consciousness of the socio-cultural and political circumstances that defined them but which they were also able to redefine.

This socio-political consciousness also arose in the Western subject, however, in this case it was manifested through the idea that ethnic difference was not necessarily a phenomenon of civilization but rather that it had a cultural dimension which should be understood locally first, rather than through the imposition of a universal formula, and then acknowledged as one system among many others pertaining to the idea of a multicultural interconnected world. Consequently, through the postcolonial this process of shifting perspectives and transformations began to take shape as a cultural form.

Because history is largely based on interpretation it involves perspective, and an ongoing dialogue between present and past, historian (analyst) object of study and audience. The historian, therefore, is not only a medium through which historical facts are gathered and exposed, but also a creative interpreter of the past who has access to and is capable of gathering information and rearranging it so as to gain meaning within a cultural logic. The narrative gives meaning to the culture in question but it is also a product of the dominant forces that give it life. This was as true in imperial ideology as it is true today.

Meanings are not fixed, but ever changing. And time, though it does move forward, as human science and experience has determined, through memory and reinterpretation the past can be revisited, re-defined, re-created and re-ordered infinite times. So, the interpretation of history has moved closer to how human beings actually experience the passing of time.

The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again. “The truth will not run away from us”: in the historical outlook of historicism these words of Gottfried Keller mark the exact point where historical materialism cuts through historicism. For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably. (The good tidings which the historian of the past brings

with throbbing heart may be lost in a void the very moment he opens his mouth.) (Benjamin 1977: 255)

Events are not only meaningful because they happened, but because of how they affect us as human beings, part of a collective reality. The claim Walter Benjamin is making is that historical materialism rests fundamentally on the premise that events in the past are historical if they are rendered meaningful in the present understanding of our world. The past stored in memory is an imaginary construction of reality as it relies on how an event is remembered by individuals. But this is history making and history writing in postmodern times. A moment in time may be forever lost to mankind if it is not captured and retold or recreated for a present audience. This is the process by which the past becomes history and by which history becomes historiography, historical writing or historical fiction.

“To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it “the way it really was” (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger.” (Benjamin 1977: 255)

So, Jeannette Armstrong when researching on the Syilx (Okanagan) people asks the question, “What should a literature for our times be?” (Armstrong 2012: 355) The postcolonial created the possibility to tell old stories in a new language (in a literal and figurative sense), through a new narrative which may reach out to the people of today and the people who are in the process of becoming. And this process has affected former indigenous or colonized peoples differently of which Indian writing in English is just one among the others. What matters here is agency and voice and extending this possibility endlessly.

The postcolonial narrative emerges as a discourse for a national identity where the construction of a new society must go hand in hand with the reconstruction of a new ideal of society, whereby the past is not lost, and difference is not marginalized but both are re-worked and adapted to present circumstances.

Through postcolonialism, the national subject – individual or collective has become historical, and power has been re-asserted within those speaking out. Therefore, new subjective forms and interpretations of historical processes and culture keep emerging in order to provide coherence to the postcolonial nation and its people.

Because of the changes in the physical and symbolic geographies of nation, borders have opened to welcome and incorporate new realities. The core has expanded, just as what may have once been considered periphery has migrated inwards, redefining boundaries. And not only has the centre expanded to accommodate new realities but new spheres of action keep emerging. The focus is on present day society as the site where new cultural processes and transformations are occurring.

An important branch of postcolonial literature focuses on the diasporic subject. Diaspora is that space where hybrid identities and cultural practices gain shape. The fluid nature of societies results in the complexity of the diasporic subject with a fragmented sense of the self, caught between cultural roots, capitalist structures, tradition and progress, a nostalgia for the homeland, and the search for identity. Since a return to the homeland most of the times never happens, diasporic subjects create what Rushdie has timelessly termed 'imaginary homelands' where an ideal of the lost 'home', 'nation', 'culture' is recreated in the hostland or in the imaginary and this aspect becomes an important and nurturing factor of identity worked through the poetics of belonging. The text, along with other forms of diasporic creativity allows writers and readers to explore these feelings. Diaspora also raises questions on the coherence of the modern nation due to the scattering of people, the fusion of languages and cultures, the blurring of borders and the unstable nature of contemporary society. It is in the nation as space that the negotiation of these meanings takes place. And it is through this process that cultural metaphors emerge.

While dwelling in a sense of detachment, displacement and isolation, caught between the desire to move on and the need to hold on, the diasporic subject resides in that space between longing and loss in the attempt to fill the emptiness caused by separation from the homeland or loved ones. Desai sums this beautifully in the following quote:

“Could fulfillment ever be felt as deeply as loss? Romantically she decided that love must surely reside in the gap between desire and fulfillment, in the lack, not the contentment. Love was the ache, the anticipation, the retreat, everything around it but the feeling itself.” (Desai 2006:2)

The two novels I have discussed in my thesis, as well as other examples from postcolonial literature, also enter the realm of the postmodern. By this I mean that, since contemporary art challenges standard forms, in doing so it also exposes the complex realities through which the world and its structures have been subverted. One of the main focus points of postmodernism is to question representation itself and then, to expose culture as a commodity. When dealing with the past, as Linda Hutcheon argues, the postmodern always involves a return, though not a nostalgic return as in the postcolonial, but a “critical reworking” (Hutcheon 1988, 2000).

Postmodernism's distinctive character lies in this kind of wholesale 'nudging' commitment to doubleness, or duplicity. In many ways it is an even-handed process because postmodernism ultimately manages to install and reinforce as much as undermine the conventions and presuppositions it appears to challenge. Nevertheless it seems reasonable to say that the postmodern's initial concern is to de-naturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life; to point out those entities that we unthinkingly experience as 'natural' (they might even include capitalism, patriarchy, liberal humanism) are in fact 'cultural', made by us, not given to us. Even nature, postmodernism might point out, doesn't grow on trees. (Hutcheon 2002: 2)

Postmodernist art reflects the fragmented nature of contemporary society, of history and of form and consequently of the individual caught in the middle of all this mess. The narrative style, the fictional content and the characters in these novels are good examples of these aspects of the postmodern since they fall neatly into the defining aspects of the form. And so postmodern art tries to represent the loss of coherence and familiarity, this fragmentary nature of existence and loss of meaning. It also represents the fact that meaning, interpretation and representation are in the hands of those who express and promote it through individually and subjectively chosen forms.

The postmodern narrative distorts standards of language use. This playing with form and expectations not only challenges institutionalized structures but also imitates new Englishes which are emerging around the world such as Hinglish or even aiming for postmodern versions of the oral tradition where the written word has sound, even an accent (Chantal Zabus, 2002) or even creating a sense of disorientation in the reader. The postmodern explores the open and incomplete nature of the narrative, a reflection of the world itself as an incomplete text, plays with creative processes that unbury the old and fuse it with the new, the local and universal, focuses on reproduction, experimentation and consumerism to both denounce and express the loss of value and references. There is a definite movement from the intended and idealized colonial order to represent a post-colonial disorder. This notion of “disorder” however is also intentional as a critique of colonialism and the historical consequences it carried with it. Postmodern narratives reflect life in its naked form since, to quote, James Clifford, “living does not easily organize itself into a continuous narrative.” (Clifford 1986:106)

The third and final approach to the analysis of the postcolonial novel as developed in my thesis, draws attention to the relationship between fiction and the ethnography. Because of the subjectivities involved in the act of observing and documenting human behaviour, anthropologists James Clifford and George E. Marcus edited a book called *Writing Culture* in 1986 in which the collected essays by different anthropologists focus on the narrative aspects of the ethnography and how close these come to fiction. As human beings performing cultural analysis we get caught in a world of subjectivities affected by intrinsic and extrinsic factors. In Roy’s words, “when I tell a story, I tell it not as an ideologue who wants to pit one absolutist ideology against another, but as a story-teller who wants to share her way of seeing. (Roy 2007:33)

The two novels by Roy and Desai, while portraying different aspects and practices of Indian culture may be acknowledged as ethnographic accounts. Our lives are composed of stories, and through storytelling we all contribute towards a broader knowledge of the world. Anthropology and History allow for an understanding of the processes that shaped the world, but fiction gives us the possibility to move in or out of fact and reality as outside observers, into the realms of the imaginary, the personal, the emotional, the private, the local and the forgotten adding new dimensions to the understanding of events, local realities or life in general. As I mentioned earlier when discussing history, following observation, the ethnography also involves the practice, or art of writing and here is where the narrative is a creative construction on the part of the ethnographer. The reader, as the audience are a fundamental part of this three-dimensional process as they are on the receiving end of the

interpretation or formulating new narratives and interpretations. Postcolonial fiction supports the idea of the indigenous ethnographer.

A new figure has entered the scene, the “indigenous ethnographer” (Fahim, ed. 1982; Ohnuki-Tierney 1984). Insiders studying their own cultures offer new angles of vision and depths of understanding. Their accounts are empowered and restricted in unique ways. Their diverse post- and neo colonial rules for ethnographic practice do not necessarily encourage “better” cultural accounts. The criteria for judging a good account have never been settled and are changing. But what has emerged from all these ideological shifts, rule changes, and new compromises is the fact that a series of historical pressures have begun to reposition anthropology with respect to its “objects” of study. Anthropology no longer speaks with automatic authority for others defined as unable to speak for themselves (“primitive,” “pre-literate,” “without history”). (Clifford 1986:10)

Local realities, practices and events are narrated or told through an insider perspective, beliefs and experience as opposed to the traditional role of the ethnographer who would do so as an outsider with a pre-defined idea. Whereas ethnographies provide an interpretation, fiction opens the door to interpretations. Postcolonial narratives not only expose the transformations in the traditional roles of the ethnography, anthropology or history but also become the site of multiple stories and endless possibilities of story-telling.

In conclusion, these reflections on the postcolonial have proposed an analysis of history, culture and identity through fiction, while exposing the difficulties and benefits in the methodologies because of the transformations cultures undergo at a constant rate. The discussion in this paper, which as I have repeatedly referred is more amply analysed in my thesis is also meant as a deconstructive effort challenging the fixed nature of concepts that have been used in the interpretation of cultures such as ‘history’, ‘postcolonial’, ‘authentic’, ‘objective’ and ‘ethnography’ to emphasize the importance of the individual, the subjective, interpretation and creativity, though always within a cultural logic. With decolonization the world witnessed the opening of new spaces for representation, new narratives coming from newly emerging nations and cultures, on the global map. Postcolonial fiction adopting the colonizer’s tongue and form defined an image for itself in the appropriation and re-writing of history, as a voice of resistance denouncing social and political inequalities and in the propagation of a national culture at home and in the diaspora. Studying fiction and art has been shifting perspectives but with further transformations in society resulting from the increasing movement of people throughout the world, technology, the diffusion and fusion of cultural forms and the commodification of cultures, what is the role of the postcolonial today? Does it lose itself in the theoretical abstraction of the concept or can it continue to make itself visible as an active form in contemporary global society and in a complex world where imperialism is still deep-rooted? In Desai’s words, the “truth is apparent. All you need to do is reach out and pluck it.”

I understand the postcolonial novel as a metaphor, an evocation, an idea of the nation, and as such a text open to endless interpretation, reflecting the inconsistencies of

history and modernity. Because culture itself is a process of ongoing transformations where neither the past, present nor future should be disregarded but rather engage in a constant negotiation of meaning in a rapidly moving world. And I end with a quote from Clifford when he states that “Cultures do not hold still for their portraits” (Clifford 1986:10).

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