

Creating Other: Cultural exotisation and Magical thinking

We have looked out and seen the other, with a romantic vision of alterity we create magic and ritual. However, with a twist of perspective and a polished mirror we can see ourselves as the lesser well known tribesman of the West and we can locate magic and ritual in the most mundane of our practices.

Early 20thc Ethnographic graphic writings explore ritual and magic in the seemingly exotic cultures of others. However, I am grateful to Professor Horace Miner, who's research on the Nacirema tribe; reveals magical and ritualist practices of Western culture

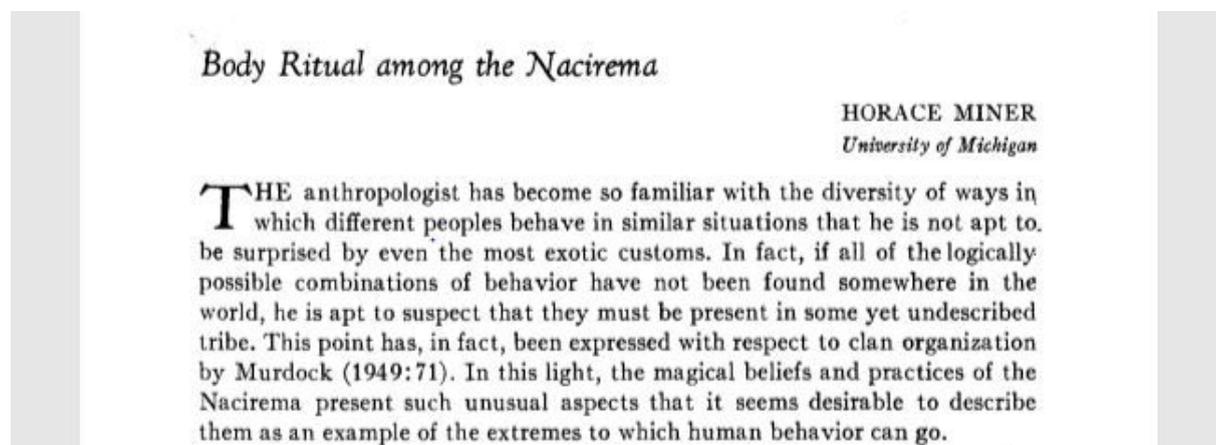


Image 1: Shows a text excerpt of Horace Miner's article: Body Ritual among the Nacirema, (1956) American Anthropologist Journal

In 1956, Horace Miner brought attention to the extreme behaviours of Nacirema society and their ritualistic practices. 'Nacirema' being an anagram of the word 'American' as Miner is in fact parodying Western culture. The prestigious American Anthropological Association published his article: Body Ritual Among the Nacirema (1956) in their academic journal: American Anthropologist. Miner explores the ritualised daily practice of teeth brushing (mouth-rite ritual) in western society. As he describes teeth brushing, he exotises the practice and uses a familiar anthropological lexicon of magic and ritual. With a focus on the mouth-rite ritual he explains the position of magic practitioners (dentists, doctors and psychiatrists) in relation to clan hierarchy and he considers how Western belief systems and associated mythologies (conceptions of the body) inform ceremonial practices which is a form of magical thinking. The observational narrative upholds the conventions of traditional ethnography and the institutional authority of the American Anthropological Association gives a credence to the credibility of the voice of the author.

To understand the Miner's ethnographic writing we must consider methods of objectification and the language of alterity within the broader historical context of Anthropology.

Language & Alterity

Traditionally, anthropologists located their field of study elsewhere¹, in the field of the other. When describing culture, authors objectify social groups- claiming that the thing described exists 'out there'. Whilst objectifying, anthropologists assert authority and knowledge. To gain knowledge about a cultural object, ethnographers use qualitative research methodologies where they observe social phenomena, conduct interviews and participate in daily life of the others' culture.

Malinowski promoted participant observation as a methodology as he argued that it allows the anthropologist to 'see... things from the native's point of view' (Osterhoudt, 2010). For the Nacirema tribe Miner writes: "I was able ...to establish sufficient rapport with the natives to examine these shrines and to have the rituals described to me" (1956, 503-504). Miner detaches himself from his own culture in order to observe it from a distance and create a satirical observational analysis. The detached narrative demonstrates the dangers of creating a separation between an author and a subject culture as: the audience relates to the author they become distanced from the subject culture. In Miners article American audiences are alienated from the mundanity of their own culture..

Narratively, Miner is stating his cultural alterity whilst also claiming his close social relationship with his informants. Yet throughout the article, Miner does not reference or quote directly from a 'native voice': he omits completely the voice of the other. This divisive move indicates that his descriptions are *his* interpretations of the ceremony as oppose to the interpretation of the informants. The relationship becomes inherently political as the ethnographer claims sufficient knowledge on the tribe to represent them without leaving space for the culture's own voice.

Whilst early Anthropologists use participant observation they create alterity and usually they talk about their perceptions of others experiences rather than their own experiences. Indeed, when writing about the culture they experience anthropologist employ linguistic dichotomies to distinguish themselves. Early ethnographies that have linguistic dichotomies are inherently political as dichotomies serve hierarchical models as they are steeped in the enlightenment ideology.

¹ (OusterHoudt, 2010) Now anthropologists also focus on social processes, embodiments, transaction and more rather than seeing culture as an object of study, there is a broader understanding of the field.

An example of an Linguistic dichotomy of self and other within a hierarchical, oppositional model:



This oppositional models can be understood as hierarchical when considering the power dynamics between the two related groups: the role of the anthropologist as a representer of culture and the culture as represented. Miner's work references this hierarchical oppositional model in his work by establishing a separation between himself and the culture that he is describing.

Miner writes: '**they** are a North American group living in the territory between the Canadian Cree, the Yaqui and Tarahumare of Mexico... little is known of **their** origin'. (**Bold**, my emphasis, 1956, 503). Throughout the article Milner indicates the 'otherness' of the Nacirema culture using a linguistic dichotomy. By separating himself from the his cultural subject, he ensures the alienation of his audience (readers of the American Anthropologists, Students, Academics) from the culture as well. Miner intentionally distances the audience when describing practices from their own culture to demonstrate how easy it is to create a social other through linguistic devices.

The dichotomy of us and them references colonial encounters. Institutions aware of the power dynamic between us and them increasingly allow space for represented cultures to 'have a voice' in and amongst Western curated exhibitions. The Royal Academy's recent exhibition Oceania (September- December 2018) brought together over 250 artefacts from the Pacific Islands as well as showcasing work form contemporary artists.

Part of exhibition, Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner's contemporary poem speaks directly to the audience of the gallery. Putting on headphones and watching the video, we hear all the notes in her voice as we listen to *Tell Them*, a poem that employs the linguistic dichotomy of We and Them to challenge the historically hierarchical opposition:

Jetñil-Kijiner (begins with a nervous smile and her soft voice starts to speak of the Marshall Islands inhabitants: “proud people toasted dark brown”. Her poetic narrative tell the audience about a Marshall Islander who packages and sends a gift to a friend living in the States. With the package she sends a message where she states what the friend should tell Americans if they ask about her gifts.

I prepared the package,
for my friends in the states
the dangling earrings woven
into half moons black pearls glinting
like an eye in a storm of tight spirals
the baskets
sturdy, also woven

She details that the earnings will be seen by a Western audience: at grocery stores, at parties, riding the bus. She instructs her friend, the mediator, a role parallel to the anthropologist, to give a message to the Western audience:

and when others ask you
where you got this
you tell them
they're from the Marshall Islands...

As the poem continues Jetñil-Kijiner's voice grows strong, full of conviction and she increasing employs the linguistic dichotomy:

tell them we are a proud people
tell them we are descendents...

Throughout the poem we hear Jetñil-Kijiner recount the trauma of colonialism, racism and forced migration. The poetic passion in her words and the sound of her voice strike the audience as we, she approaches the white western gallery goers with a message from Marshal islander. The audience see Jetñil-Kijiner as she speaks the words and we are forced to realise that the Marshall Islanders exist as people and have a living culture outside of the Western imagination.

tell them
we are days
and nights hotter
than anything you can imagine

She uses metaphors of colonial culture and modern consumables to indicate the hangovers of colonial oppression and imperialist ideology:

We are shards of broken beer bottles
burrowed beneath fine white sand...

Both Jetñil-Kijiner and Miner use linguistic dichotomy of us and them to alienate two groups of people. Miner distances his audience (Americans) from the ethnographic subject (Also Americans- Parody effect) whilst Jetñil-Kijiner distance Americans (and similar Western cultures) from Native Marshall islanders. Miners work installs an oppositional relationship between the two groups; He authoritative voice claims knowledge about the Nacirema as he speaks on behalf of the Nacirema culture he assumes a more powerful political position. Where as Jetñil-Kijiner references the traditional power dynamic of us and them. With her gift, Jetñil-Kijiner, a Marshall Islander, sends a message to the States through use of an intermediary (her friend) and by doing so she demands the respect of the native voice whilst also admits the difficulty of direct communication to the social other and the need of a cultural intermediary.

The power dynamic between the anthropologist or artist and a represented culture is almost inescapable. Hal Foster (1996) in his 'Artist as Ethnographer' investigates the 'ethnographic turn' where artists take on the issues of anthropologists regarding the representation of culture. The power dynamic between ethnographer and informant is likened to that as Artist and Proletariat in Walter Benjamin's 'Author as producer'. Where the artist or ethnographer finds themselves in a position of: 'That of a benefactor, of an ideological patron' a gatekeeper, or spokesperson. Despite this power dynamic, Hal Foster promotes the dialogue between the two disciplines and the productive possibilities of the intersections between art and anthropology.

Both Miner and Jetñil-Kijiner give an example of such productive possibilities. Both authors use the linguistic dichotomies of self and other to as a device to talk about distinct cultures. Miner's piece on the Nacirema tribe demonstrates how whilst working within the context of ethnographic authority using parody and satire to talk about Western culture he actually challenges the perception of culture and institutional authority. On the other hand Jetñil-Kijiner's creative work directly speaks to the audience about the relationships between two cultures and her work references colonial structures and their continuity in contemporary society.

The ideological separation of cultures has political roots in the 17th and 18th centuries' Enlightenment period: an ideology that celebrated 'reason' and rationality in opposition to the irrational: magic and ceremony. The enlightenment's ideology legitimised colonial encounters for in the name of liberty and science lands were conquered and native men were taught the ways of civilisation as they were freed of superstition and magical thinking.²

² (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2019):

19th C anthropologists considered 'Magical thinking' as important an topic. The argument lead: Magical thinking featured in religious beliefs where one held a notion of a causal relationship between the internal experience with participation of a higher power could affect the external world. Early theorists (like Malinowski 1948, Frazer 1890) suggested that magical thinking characterized traditional, non-Western cultures, which contrasted with the more developmentally advanced rational-scientific thought found in industrialized Western cultures. Magical thinking, then, was tied to religion and "primitive" cultures and considered developmentally inferior to the scientific reasoning found in more "advanced" Western cultures.

As colonisers perceived themselves as Scientifically enlightened, noble and civilised they exoticised other and interrogated magical practices and considered them developmentally inferior.

The relationship between imperialistic authority and power and its relationship to social alterity has been written about by Edward Said. Through a notion of Orientalism; we can identify a process of exoticisation of the other: the production of an imaginary version of reality of the other: a fantasy of 'alterity' that an author creates when they translate their fieldwork and ethnography or other cultural representative work. Exoticisation of another culture suggests the subjectivity of a text.

Within the anthropological discipline, self-reflexive critique has often acknowledge the concerns of subjectivity: Indeed, Evans-Pritchard write: "what one brings out of a study largely depends on what one brings to it" (1974:241). Miner creates a vision of the 'savage other' when he described the teeth brushing practice of Americans.

Miner demonstrates how easily subjectivity spins observations of culture into exoticised fictions. Indeed, through a perception of magical thinking, a marked separation from the American culture and exoticised narrative Miner translates teeth brushing, a seemingly mundane activity into a curious ritualistic ceremony. Miner perceives magical thinking a causal link between one's inner, personal experience and the external physical world in Western practices:

In the hierarchy of magical practitioners, and below the medicine men in prestige, are specialists whose designation is best translated "holy-mouth-men." The Nacirema have an almost pathological horror of and fascination with the mouth, the condition of which is believed to have a supernatural influence on all social relationships. Were it not for the rituals of the mouth, they believe that their teeth would fall out, their gums bleed, their jaws shrink, their friends desert them, and their lovers reject them. They also believe that a strong relationship exists between oral and moral characteristics. For example, there is a ritual ablution of the mouth for children which is supposed to improve their moral fiber.

When Miner talks about a bathroom cabinet, its medicinal contents and how America acquired there various prescriptions he describes:

The focal point of the shrine is a box or chest which is built into the wall. In this chest are kept the many charms and magical potions without which no native believes he could live. These preparations are secured from a variety of specialized practitioners. The most powerful of these are the medicine men, whose assistance must be rewarded with substantial gifts. However, the medicine men do not provide the curative potions for their clients, but decide what the ingredients should be and then write them down in an ancient and secret language. This writing is understood only by the medicine men and by the herbalists who, for another gift, provide the required charm.

It is easy to breakdown Miner's observations: the shrine box is a cabinet with medical prescriptions. Doctors (specialised practitioners) receive money (substantial gifts) and write prescriptions. Rarely people have the knowledge to understand their prescriptions (lack medical knowledge) and medical terms often have lingual roots derived from Latin (Wolff, 2004).

Miner employs words like 'magic' and 'charm' to describe the unknowns of an alternative culture. This unknowns can easily be given code words to to create a common understanding of nuanced phenomenon

Anthropologists often substitute unfamiliar technical words with more familiar lexicons. Jackson reports that in her interviews with anthropologists: ethnographers often describe their fieldnotes: by "using familiar words from the anthropological lexicon such as sacred, taboo, fetish, exorcise, and ritual." (Jackson 1990, in Osterhoudt 2010). For example, Miner, assuming cultural ignorance, writes about dentists as 'best translated as "holy mouth-men". Here Miner remarks that the translation is not exact thus he admits using a rough code to describe the objective culture to the distant audience. Indeed, the impossible task of describing culture leads the anthropologist to best translate that with which he experiences and sees.

Historical narrative and cultural representation has lead to exotised fictions of the distant other. Both Miner and Kathy Jetñil-kijiner's work challenge hierarchical values projected onto bodies of alterity. By taking a self-reflexive lense and a familiar anthropological lexicon, Miner's satirical ethnography forces us to reconsider how we interpret and textually represent cultural practices. Kathy Jetñil-kijiner poem speaks across cultures: as she asserts her voice amongst Western audiences as a native of the Marshall Islands, she challenges the familiar hierarchical dichotomy of us and them that is found in Western historical narrative. Miner's article indicates the productive possibilities of appropriating ethnographic language and methodology to create new interpretations on contemporary Western Cultures. Kathy Jetñil-kijiner poem highlights the importance of people having the right to represent their own culture within the context of another culturally distinct institution. The poem's place amongst the Royal Academy's Oceania Exhibition demonstrates the awareness and power

of curatorial practices to shape debates on art history and cultural inheritance in contemporary art society and beyond.

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