

Resistance and the Problem of Ethnographic Refusal

This essay traces the effects of what I call ethnographic refusal on a series of studies surrounding the subject of resistance.¹ I argue that many of the most influential studies of resistance are severely limited by the lack of an ethnographic perspective. Resistance studies in turn are meant to stand in for a great deal of interdisciplinary work being done these days within and across the social sciences, history, literature, and cultural studies.

Ethnography of course means many things. Minimally, however, it has always meant the attempt to understand another life world using the self—as much of it as possible—as the instrument of knowing. As is by now widely known, ethnography has come under a great deal of internal criticism within anthropology (see especially Gupta and Ferguson 1992, 1997), but this minimal definition has not for the most part been challenged.

Classically, this kind of understanding has been closely linked with fieldwork, in which the whole self physically and in every other way enters the space of the world the researcher seeks to understand. Yet implicit in much of the recent discussions of ethnography is something I wish to make explicit here: that the ethnographic stance (as we may call it) is as much an intellectual (and moral) positionality—a constructive and interpretive mode—as it is a bodily process in space and time. Thus, in a recent useful discussion of “ethnography and the historical imagination,” John and Jean

Comaroff (1992) spend relatively little time on ethnography in the sense of fieldwork but a great deal of time on ways of reading historical sources ethnographically, that is, partly as if they had been produced through fieldwork.

What, then, is the ethnographic stance, whether based in fieldwork or not? It is first and foremost a commitment to what Geertz has called “thickness,” to producing understanding through richness, texture, and detail, rather than parsimony, refinement, and (in the sense used by mathematicians) elegance. The forms that ethnographic thickness have taken have of course changed over time. There was a time when thickness was perhaps synonymous with exhaustiveness, producing the almost unreadably detailed descriptive ethnography, often followed by the famous “Another Pot from Old Oraibi” kind of journal article. Later, thickness came to be synonymous with holism, the idea that the object under study was “a” highly integrated “culture” and that it was possible to describe the entire system or at least fully grasp the principles underlying it.

Holism in this sense has also been under attack for some time, and most anthropologists today recognize both the hubris of the holistic vision and the innumerable gaps and fissures in all societies, including the so-called pre-modern societies that were imagined to be more integrated and whole than fragmented modern societies. Yet I would argue that thickness (with traces of both exhaustiveness and holism) remains at the heart of the ethnographic stance. Nowadays, issues of thickness focus primarily on issues of (relatively exhaustive) contextualization. George Marcus (1986), for example, examines the ways in which ethnography in the local and usually bodily sense must be contextualized within the global processes of the world system. And the Comaroffs emphasize the need always to contextualize the data produced through fieldwork and archival research within the forms of practice within which they took shape: “If texts are to be more than literary topoi, scattered shards from which we presume worlds, they have to be anchored in the processes of their production, in the orbits of connection and influence that give them life and force” (1992:34). Martha Kaplan and John Kelly (1994) also insist on a kind of density of contextualization, in their case by articulating the characteristics of the dialogic space within which a political history must be seen as unfolding.

If the ethnographic stance is founded centrally on (among other things, of course) a commitment to thickness, and if thickness has taken and still takes

many forms, what I am calling ethnographic refusal involves a refusal of thickness, a failure of holism or density which itself may take various forms. This study, then, is about some of the forms of ethnographic refusal, some of its consequences, and some of its reasons, organized around the topic of resistance. A few words first about resistance.

Resistance and Domination

Once upon a time, resistance was a relatively unambiguous category, half of the seemingly simple binary, domination versus resistance. Domination was a relatively fixed and institutionalized form of power; resistance was essentially organized opposition to power institutionalized in this way. This binary began to be refined (but not abolished) by questioning both terms. On the one hand Foucault (for example, 1978) drew attention to less institutionalized, more pervasive, and more everyday forms of power. On the other hand James Scott (1985) drew attention to less organized, more pervasive, and more everyday forms of resistance. With Scott's delineation of the notion of "everyday forms of resistance" (1985), in turn, the question of what is or is not resistance became much more complicated.² When a poor man steals from a rich man, is this resistance or simply a survival strategy? The question runs through an entire collection of essays devoted to everyday forms of resistance (Scott and Kerkvliet 1986), and different authors attempt to answer it in different ways. Michael Adas (1986), for example, constructs a typology of forms of everyday resistance, the better to help us place what we are seeing. Brian Fegan (1986) concentrates on the question of intention: If a relatively conscious intention to resist is not present, the act is not one of resistance. Still others (e.g., Stoler 1986; Cooper 1992) suggest that the category itself is not very helpful and that the important thing is to attend to a variety of transformative processes, in which things do get changed, regardless of the intentions of the actors or of the presence of very mixed intentions.

In the long run I might agree with Stoler and Cooper, but for the moment I think resistance, even at its most ambiguous, is a reasonably useful category, if only because it highlights the presence and play of power in most forms of relationship and activity. Moreover we are not required to decide once and for all whether any given act fits into a fixed box called resistance. As Marx well knew, the intentionalities of actors evolve through praxis, and the meanings of the acts change, both for the actor and for the analyst. In fact the ambiguity of

resistance and the subjective ambivalence of the acts for those who engage in them are among the things I wish to emphasize in this essay. In a relationship of power the dominant often has something to offer, and sometimes a great deal (though always of course at the price of continuing in power). The subordinate thus has many grounds for ambivalence about resisting the relationship. Moreover there is never a single, unitary subordinate, if only in the simple senses that subaltern groups are internally divided by age, gender, status, and other forms of difference and that occupants of differing subject positions will have different—even opposed, but still legitimate—perspectives on the situation. (The question of whether even a single person is “unitary” is addressed later in this essay.)

Both the psychological ambivalence and the social complexity of resistance have been noted by several, but not enough, observers.³ Brian Fegan talks about being “constantly baffled by the contradictory ways peasants talked about the tenancy system in general, or about their own relations with particular landlords” (1986:92). Moreover, the peasants of Central Luzon whom Fegan studied were psychologically uncomfortable with both acts of resistance and acts of collaboration: “Many men talking to me privately about the strategems they use to survive, broke off to say they found theft from the landlord, working for the landlord as guards, arms dealing, etc., distasteful. But what else could a person with children do?” (1986:93).

In a different vein, Christine Pelzer White says that “we must add an inventory of ‘everyday forms of peasant *collaboration*’ to balance our list of ‘everyday forms of peasant resistance’: both exist, both are important” (1986: 56). She goes on to present examples from postrevolutionary Vietnam of varying alliances between sectors with different interests, including “the state and peasantry against the local elite[,] . . . the peasants and the local elite against the state[, and] . . . the state and individuals [mostly women] against [male] household heads” (1986:60).

Closely related to questions of the psychological and sociopolitical complexity of resistance and nonresistance (and to the need for thick ethnography) is the question of authenticity. Authenticity is another highly problematic term, insofar as it seems to presume a naive belief in cultural purity, in untouched cultures whose histories are uncontaminated by those of their neighbors or of the West. I make no such presumptions; nonetheless, there must be a way to talk about what the Comaroffs call “the endogenous histor-

icity of local worlds” (1992:27), in which the pieces of reality, however much borrowed from or imposed by others, are woven together through the logic of a group’s own locally and historically evolved bricolage. This is what I mean by authenticity in the discussions that follow, as I turn to a consideration of some of the recent literature on resistance.

I should note here that the works to be discussed constitute a very selected and partial set, and I make no claim to cover the entire literature. In this era of interdisciplinarity scholarly exhaustiveness is more unattainable than ever, but, more important, the works are selected here either because they have been very influential or because they illustrate a fairly common problem or both. In any event, the point of the discussion is to examine a number of problems in the resistance literature arising from the stance of ethnographic refusal. The discussion will be organized in terms of three forms of such refusal, which I will call sanitizing politics, thinning culture, and dissolving actors.

Sanitizing Politics

It may seem odd to start off by criticizing studies of resistance for not containing enough politics. If there is one thing these studies examine, it is politics, front and center. Yet the discussion is usually limited to the politics of resistance, that is, to the relationship between the dominant and the subordinate (see also Cooper 1992:4). If we are to recognize that resisters are doing more than simply opposing domination, more than simply producing a virtually mechanical reaction, then we must go the whole way. They have their *own* politics—not just between chiefs and commoners or landlords and peasants—but within all the local categories of friction and tension: men and women, parents and children, and seniors and juniors; inheritance conflicts among brothers; struggles of succession and wars of conquest between chiefs; struggles for primacy between religious sects; and on and on.

It is the absence of analysis of these forms of internal conflict in many resistance studies that gives them an air of romanticism, which Lila Abu-Lughod (1990) has correctly charged. Let me take one example, from a fine book that I admire on many other counts: Inga Clendinnen’s *Ambivalent Conquests: Maya and Spaniard in Yucatan, 1517–1570* (1987). Clendinnen recognizes that there were Maya chiefs who had significant advantages of material resources, political power, and social precedence. She also recognizes that, in this sort of polity, chiefs had many obligations in turn to their subjects,

including the redistribution of (some) wealth through feasts and hospitality and the staging of rituals for the collective well-being. Yet the degree to which she emphasizes the reciprocity over the asymmetry of the relationship systematically excludes from the reader's view a picture of some of the serious exploitation and violence of the Mayan political economy. Chiefs engaged in "extravagant and casual taking" (143), "were allocated the most favoured land for the making of *milpa*" (144), and "were given the lords' share of the game taken in a communal hunt [and] levied from the professional hunters" (144); their land was worked by war captives, and their domestic system was maintained by "female slaves and concubines" (144). Yet Clendinnen balances the mention of each of those instances of systematic exploitation with some mention of how much the chiefs gave in return, culminating in an account of a ritual to protect the villagers from threatened calamity: "In those experiences, when the life of the whole village was absorbed in the ritual process, men learnt that the differences between priest, lord and commoner were less important than their shared dependence on the gods, and the fragility of the human order" (147).

Clendinnen goes on to say (1987:47) that "the cost of all this (although it is far from clear that the Maya regarded it as a cost) was war," which was waged between chiefs of neighboring groups. In war "noble captives were killed for the gods; the rest, men, women and children, were enslaved, and the men sold out of the country" (148). What is wrong with this picture? In the first place one presumes that some Maya—the captives who were to be executed, and the men, women, and children who were enslaved, not to mention everyone else in the society who had to live with the permanent possibility of such violence—"regarded it as a cost." In the second place Clendinnen never puts together the pieces of her account to show that the sense of "shared dependence" of chiefs and commoners, insofar as it was successfully established at all, was in large part a product of the displacement of exploitation and violence from the chief's own subjects to those of his neighbors.

There seems a virtual taboo on putting these pieces together, as if to give a full account of the Mayan political order, good and bad, would be to give some observers the ammunition for saying that the Maya deserved what they got from the Spanish. But this concern is ungrounded. Nothing about Mayan politics, however bloody and exploitative, would condone the looting, killing, and cultural destruction wrought by the Spanish. But a more thorough and

critical account of precolonial Mayan politics would presumably generate a different picture of the subsequent shape of the colonial history of the region, including the subsequent patterns of resistance and nonresistance. At the very least it would respect the ambivalent complexity of the Maya world as it existed both at that time and in the present.⁴

The most glaring arena of internal political complexity glossed over by most of these studies is the arena of gender politics.⁵ This is a particularly vexed question. Members of subordinate groups who want to call attention to gender inequities in their own groups are subject to the accusation that they are undermining their own class or subaltern solidarity, not supporting their men, and playing into the hands of the dominants. “First-world” feminist scholars who do the same are subject to sharp attacks from “third-world” feminist scholars on the same grounds (see C. Mohanty 1988). It seems elitist to call attention to the oppression of women within their own class or racial group or culture when that class or racial group or culture is being oppressed by another group.

These issues have come into sharp focus in the debates surrounding *sati*, or widow burning, in colonial India (Spivak 1988; Jain, Misra, and Srivastava 1987; Mani 1987). One of the ways in which the British justified their own dominance was to point to what they considered barbaric practices, such as *sati*, and to claim that they were engaged in a civilizing mission that would save Indian women from these practices. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has ironically characterized this situation as one in which “white men are saving brown women from brown men” (1988:296). Thus analysts who might want to investigate the ways in which *sati* was part of a larger configuration of male dominance in nineteenth-century Indian society cannot do so without seeming to subscribe to the discourse of the colonial administrators. The attempts to deal with this particular set of contradictions have only multiplied the contradictions.

Overall, the lack of an adequate sense of prior and ongoing politics *among* subalterns must inevitably contribute to an inadequate analysis of resistance itself. Many people do not get caught up in resistance movements, and this is not simply an effect of fear (as James Scott generally argues [1985, 1990]), naive enthrallment to the priests (as Friedrich [1985] argues about many of the nonresisting Mexican peasants), or narrow self-interest. Nor does it make collaborators of all the nonparticipants. Finally, individual acts of resistance,

as well as large-scale resistance movements, are often themselves conflicted, internally contradictory, and affectively ambivalent, in large part due to these internal political complexities.

The impulse to sanitize the internal politics of the dominated must be understood as fundamentally romantic. As a partial antidote to this widespread tendency it might be well to reintroduce the work of the so-called structural Marxists in anthropology and their descendants. Structural Marxism (the Bloch 1975 reader is a good place to start; see also Meillassoux 1981 and Terray 1972) took shape as a response to this romanticizing tendency within the field of anthropology and as an attempt to understand non-Western and precapitalist forms of inequality on the analogy with Marx's analysis of class within capitalism. Tackling societies that would have been categorized as egalitarian precisely because they lacked class or caste, structural Marxists were able to tease out the ways in which such things as the apparent benevolent authority of elders or the apparent altruism and solidarity of kin are often grounded in systematic patterns of exploitation and power.

The structural Marxist project took shape at roughly the same time as did feminist anthropology.⁶ The two together made it difficult for many anthropologists, myself included, to look at even the simplest society ever again without seeing a politics every bit as complex, and sometimes every bit as oppressive, as those of capitalism and colonialism.⁷ As anthropologists of this persuasion began taking the historic turn, it seemed impossible to understand the histories of these societies, including (but not limited to) their histories under colonialism or capitalist penetration, without understanding how those external forces interacted with these internal politics. Sahlins's account (1981) of the patterns of accommodation and resistance in play between Hawaiians and Europeans in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; some of Wolf's discussions in *Europe and the People without History* (1982); my own history (1989) of Sherpa religious transformations, linking indigenous politics and culture with larger regional (Nepal state and British Raj) dynamics; Richard Fox's study (1985) of the evolution of Sikh identity under colonialism—all of these show that an understanding of political authenticity, of the people's own forms of inequality and asymmetry, is not only not incompatible with an understanding of resistance but is in fact indispensable to such an understanding.

Thinning Culture

Just as subalterns must be seen as having an authentic, and not merely reactive, politics, so they must be seen as having an authentic, and not merely reactive, culture. The culture concept in anthropology has, like ethnography, come under heavy attack in recent years, partly for assumptions of timelessness, homogeneity, uncontested sharedness, and the like that were historically embedded in it and in anthropological practice more generally. Yet those assumptions are not by any means intrinsic to the concept, which can be (re)mobilized in powerful ways without them. Indeed a radical reconceptualization of culture, including both the historicization and politicization of the concept, has been going on at least since the mid-1980s in anthropology, and the attacks upon its traditional form are by now simply overkill (see Dirks, Eley, and Ortner 1994). In any event like James Clifford (1988:10), one of the major figures in the attack on the concept of culture, I do not see how we can do without it. The only alternative to recognizing that subalterns have a certain prior and ongoing cultural authenticity is to view subaltern responses to domination as ad hoc and incoherent, springing not from their own senses of order, justice, and meaning, but only from some set of ideas called into being by the situation of domination itself.

Cultural thinning is characteristic of some of the most influential studies of resistance currently on the scene.⁸ Some of the problems with this tendency may be brought into focus through a consideration of the way in which religion is (or is not) handled in some of these studies. I do not mean to suggest by this that religion is equivalent to all of culture. Nonetheless, religion is always a rich repository of cultural beliefs and values and often has close affinities with resistance movements as well. Let us then look at the treatment of religion in a number of resistance studies before turning to the question of culture more generally.

In one of the founding texts of the Subaltern Studies school of history, for example, Ranajit Guha (1988) emphasizes the importance of recognizing and not disparaging the religious bases of tribal and peasant rebellions. Indeed this is one of the central threads of Subaltern Studies writings, a major part of its effort to recognize the authentic cultural universe of subalterns, from which their acts of resistance grew. Yet the degree to which the treatment of religion in these studies is actually cultural, that is, is actually an effort to illuminate the conceptual and affective configurations within which the peas-

ants are operating, is generally minimal.⁹ Rather, the peasant is endowed with something called “religiosity,” a kind of diffuse consciousness that is never further explored as a set of ideas, practices, and feelings built into the religious universe the peasant inhabits.

Guha and others in his group are jousting with some Marxist Indian historians who share with bourgeois modernization theorists a view of religion as backward. The Subaltern Studies writers, in contrast, want to respect and validate peasant religiosity as an authentic dimension of subaltern culture, out of which an authentically oppositional politics could be and was constructed. Yet Guha’s own notion of peasant religiosity still bears the traces of Marx’s hostility toward religion, defining “religious consciousness . . . as a massive demonstration of self-estrangement” (1988:78). In addition, instead of exploring and interpreting this religiosity of the rebels in any substantive way, he makes a particular textual move to avoid this, relegating to an appendix extracts of the peasants’ own accounts of the religious visions that inspired their rebellion.

A similar casualness about religion, while paying it lip service, is evident in James Scott’s *Weapons of the Weak* (1985). The point can be seen again not only in what Scott says and does not say but in the very shape of his text. There is no general discussion of the religious landscape of the villagers, and the discussion of religious movements in his area, many of which had significant political dimensions, is confined to a few pages toward the end of the book (332–35). During Scott’s fieldwork a number of rumors of religio-political prophecies circulated in his area, as well as a “flying letter” containing similar prophecies. Like the testimonies of Guha’s rebels, this letter is reproduced, unanalyzed, in an appendix. The fact that “rarely a month goes by without a newspaper account of the prosecution of a religious teacher accused of propagating false doctrines . . .” is also relegated to a footnote (335).

But cultural thinning, as noted above, need not be confined to marginalizing religious factors, nor is it practiced only by nonanthropologists (like Guha and Scott). In his landmark work, *Europe and the People without History* (1982), Eric Wolf devotes a scant five pages at the end of the book to the question of culture, largely in order to dismiss it. And in his superb study of the Sikh wars against the British (1985), Richard Fox similarly, and much more extensively, argues against the idea that culture informs, shapes, and underpins resistance at least as much as it emerges situationally from it.

There are a number of different things going on here. In part Wolf and Fox

(and perhaps some of the others) are writing from a sixties-style materialist position. Sixties-style materialism (in anthropology at least) was opposed to giving culture any sort of active role in the social and historical process, other than mystifying the real (that is, material) causes of formations and events. At the same time, however, Wolf's and Fox's positions converge with later, and not necessarily materialist, criticisms of the culture concept (for example, Clifford and Marcus 1986) as homogenizing, dehistoricizing, and reifying the boundaries of specific groups or communities.

Coming from a different direction, Raymond Williams (1977) and other Birmingham cultural studies scholars (for example, Hall and Jefferson 1976) were actually revitalizing the culture concept. Williams specifically wanted to overcome the split between materialism and idealism and to focus on the ways in which structures of exploitation and domination are simultaneously material and cultural. He approached this through Gramsci's notion of hegemony, which Williams defined as something very close to the classic anthropological concept of culture but more politicized, more saturated with the relations of power, domination, and inequality within which it takes shape. This was healthy for the culture concept and for an anthropology that had moved significantly beyond the oppositions of the sixties. But it raised the old specter of "mystification" and "false consciousness." If domination operates in part culturally, through ideas and—in Williams's phrase—"structures of feeling," then people may accept and buy into their own domination, and the possibility of resistance may be undermined. Further, as James Scott argued, analysts who emphasize hegemony in this relatively deep, culturally internalized, sense are likely to fail to uncover those "hidden transcripts" of resistance and those non-obvious acts and moments of resistance that do take place (Scott 1990).

In fact, of course, in any situation of power there is a mixture of cultural dynamics. To some extent, and for a variety of good and bad reasons, people often do accept the representations that underwrite their own domination. At the same time they also preserve alternative "authentic" traditions of belief and value that allow them to see through those representations. Paul Willis's now classic book, *Learning to Labour* (1977), is particularly valuable in addressing this mixture of hegemony and authenticity involved in relationships of power. Willis's discussion of the ways in which the subculture of the working-class lads embodies both "penetrations" of the dominant culture and limitations on those penetrations—limitations deriving from the lads' own subcultural per-

spectives on gender—is highly illuminating. Martha Kaplan and John D. Kelly (1994) similarly underscore the cultural complexity of power and resistance. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin and, less explicitly, on Marshall Sahlins, Kaplan and Kelly frame their study of colonial Fiji as a study of contending discourses within a dialogic space. Setting aside, for the most part, the category of resistance, they insist on the thickness of the cultural process in play in colonial “zones of transcourse” (129), where “multiple grammars operate through contingently categorized people” (127). The result is a complex but illuminating picture of shifting loyalties, shifting alliances, and above all shifting categories, as British, native Fijians, and Fiji Indians contended for power, resources, and legitimacy (see also Kaplan 1990; Kelly and Kaplan 1992; Orlove 1991; Turner 1991 and n.d.).

Indeed a strong alternative tradition of resistance studies shows clearly that cultural richness does not undermine the possibility of seeing and understanding resistance. Quite the contrary: This tradition allows us to understand better both resistance and its limits. Many of the great classics of social history—for example, E. P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class* (1966) and Eugene Genovese’s *Roll, Jordan, Roll* (1976)—are great precisely because they are culturally rich, providing deep insight not only into the fact of resistance but into its forms, moments, and absences. Other outstanding examples of the genre include Clendinnen’s *Ambivalent Conquest* (despite its weakness on Maya politics discussed above), William H. Sewell Jr.’s *Work and Revolution in France* (1980), and Jean Comaroff’s *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance* (1985).

Dissolving Subjects

The question of the relationship of the individual person or subject to domination carries the resistance problematic to the level of consciousness, subjectivity, intentionality, and identity. This question has taken a particular form in debates surrounding, once again, the Subaltern Studies school of historians. I should say here that I do not launch so much criticism against the Subaltern Studies historians because they are, in Guha’s term, “terrible.” On the contrary I find myself returning to their work because much of it is insightful and provocative and also because it is situated at that intersection of anthropology, history, and literary studies that so many anthropologists (and others) find themselves occupying, often awkwardly, in contemporary scholarly work.¹⁰

In any event Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988a, 1988b) has taken the

Subaltern Studies school to task for creating a monolithic category of subaltern who is presumed to have a unitary identity and consciousness. Given my arguments about the internal complexity of subaltern politics and culture made above, I would certainly agree with this point. Yet Spivak and others who deploy a certain brand of poststructuralist (primarily Derridean) analysis go to the opposite extreme, dissolving the subject entirely into a set of “subject effects” that have virtually no coherence. Since these writers are still concerned with subalternity in some sense, they themselves wind up in incoherent positions with respect to resistance.

Let me say again that in some ways I sympathize with what they are trying to do, which is to introduce complexity, ambiguity, and contradiction into our view of the subject in ways that I have argued above must be done with politics and culture (and indeed resistance). Yet the particular poststructuralist move they make toward accomplishing this goal paradoxically destroys the object (the subject) who should be enriched, rather than impoverished, by this act of introducing complexity.

This final form of ethnographic refusal may be illustrated by examining an article entitled “‘Shahbano,’” on a famous Indian court case (Pathak and Rajan 1989). The authors, who acknowledge their debt to Spivak’s work, address the case of a Muslim Indian woman called Shahbano, who went to civil court to sue for support from her husband after a divorce. Although the court awarded her the support she sought, the decision set off a national controversy of major proportions because the court’s award (and indeed Shahbano’s decision to bring the case to a civil court in the first place) controverted local Islamic divorce law. In the wake of the controversy Shahbano wrote an open letter to the court rejecting the award and expressing her solidarity with her Muslim coreligionists.

The authors’ argument about the case runs as follows. The court’s award, as well as the larger legal framework within which it was made, operated through a discourse of protection for persons who are seen to be weak. But “to be framed by a certain kind of discourse is to be objectified as the ‘other,’ represented without the characteristic features of the ‘subject,’ sensibility and/or volition” (Pathak and Rajan 1989:563). Within the context of such discursive subjectification, the appropriate notion of resistance is simply the “refusal of subjectification” (571), the refusal to occupy the category being foisted upon oneself. Shahbano’s shifting position on her own case—first

seeking, then rejecting, the award—represented such a refusal of subjectification, the only one open to her, given her situation. “To live with what she cannot control, the female subaltern subject here responds with a discontinuous and apparently contradictory subjectivity” (572). But “her apparent inconstancy or changeability must be interpreted as her refusal to occupy the subject position [of being protected] offered to her” (572).

Basically I agree with the authors’ argument that every moment in the developing situation shifted to the foreground a different aspect of Shahbano’s multiplex identity as a woman, as poor, as a Muslim. Indeed it does not require sophisticated theorizing to recognize that every social being has a life of such multiplicity and that every social context creates such shifting between foreground and background. I also agree (although the authors never quite put it this way) that, for certain kinds of compounded powerlessness (female *and* poor *and* of minority status), “the refusal of subjectification” may be the only strategy available to the subject. Yet there are several problems with the interpretation that need to be teased out.

First, returning to an earlier discussion in this essay, there is an inadequate analysis of the internal politics of the subaltern group—in this case, of the gender and ethnic politics of the Muslim community surrounding Shahbano. The authors make it clear that this is disallowed, for it would align anyone who made such an argument with the general discourse of protection and with the specific politics of the Hindu court vis-à-vis the minority Muslims: Transforming Spivak’s aphorism cited earlier, the situation is one in which “Hindu men are saving Muslim women from Muslim men” (Pathak and Rajan 1989:566), and any author who addresses Muslim gender politics moves into the same position.

Yet one cannot help but feel a nagging suspicion about the on-the-ground politics surrounding Shahbano’s open letter rejecting the court’s award in the name of Muslim solidarity. Is the “refusal to occupy the subject position offered to her” (1989:572) an adequate account of what happened here, or might we imagine some rather more immediately lived experience of intense personal pressures from significant social others—kin, friends, neighbors, male and female—who put pressure on Shahbano in the name of their own agendas to renounce a monetary award that she desperately needed and had been seeking for ten years? Might one not say that “her refusal to occupy the subject position offered to her”—the only kind of agency or form of resistance

accorded her by the authors—is the real effect in view here, that is, the (analytic) by-product, rather than the form, of her agency? In my reading, Shahbano was attempting to be an agent, to pursue a coherent agenda, and rather creatively at that. The shifting quality of her case is not to be found in her shifting identity (whether essentialized as subaltern consciousness or seen as strategic) but in the fact that she is at the low end of every form of power in the system and is being quite actively pushed around by other, more powerful, agents.

This reading brings us to the second problem with the discussion, and here again we must turn textual analysis against the authors' own text. The whole point of the poststructuralist move is to de-essentialize the subject, to get away from the ideological construct of "that unified and freely choosing individual who is the normative male subject of Western bourgeois liberalism" (Pathak and Rajan 1989:572). And indeed the freely choosing individual is an ideological construct, in multiple senses—because the person is culturally (and socially, historically, politically) constructed; because few people have the power to freely choose very much; and so forth. The question here, however, is how to get around this ideological construct and yet retain some sense of human agency, the capacity of social beings to interpret and morally evaluate their situation and to formulate projects and try to enact them.

The authors of "Shahbano" realize that this is a problem: "Where, in all these discursive displacements, is Shahbano the woman?" (Pathak and Rajan 1989:565). But they specifically refuse to attend to her as a person, subject, agent, or any other form of intentionalized being with her own hopes, fears, desires, projects. They have only two models for such attending—psychological perspectives that attempt to tap her "inner" being" or a perspective that assumes "individualized and individualistic" heroic resisters—and they reject both (570). Instead their strategy is to focus on the mechanical interaction of a variety of disembodied forces: "multiple intersections of power, discursive displacements, discontinuous identities refusing subjectification, the split legal subject" (577). Thus, despite certain disclaimers at the end of the article, Shahbano as subject (or agent? or person?) quite literally disappears. The irrelevance of her understandings and intentions (not to mention her social universe and her history) to this analytic project is starkly brought home by the authors' own textual strategy of refusing to reproduce and interpret two press interviews that Shahbano gave, one to a newspaper and another on national

television. The authors say, “We have not privileged these as sources of her subjectivity” (570). In fact they have not even presented them.

The de(con)struction of the subject in this way cannot be the only answer to the reified and romanticized subject of many resistance studies. On the contrary the answer to the reified and romanticized subject must be an actor understood as more fully socially and culturally constructed from top to bottom. The breaks and splits and incoherencies of consciousness, no less than the integrations and coherencies, are equally products of cultural and historical formation. Indeed, one could question whether the splits and so forth should be viewed as incoherencies or simply as alternative forms of coherence; not to do so implies that they are a form of damage. Of course oppression is damaging, yet the ability of social beings to weave alternative, and sometimes brilliantly creative, forms of coherence across the damages is one of the heartening aspects of human subjectivity (see also Cooper’s [1992] critique of Fanon).

A similar point may be made with respect to agency. Agency is not an entity that exists apart from cultural construction (nor is it a quality one has only when one is whole or when one is an individual). Every culture, every subculture, every historical moment, constructs its own forms of agency, its own modes of enacting the process of reflecting on the self and the world and of acting simultaneously within and upon what one finds there. To understand where Shahbano or any other figure in a resistance drama is coming from, one must explore the particularities of all these constructions, as both cultural and historical products, and as personal creations building on those precipitates of culture and history.

A brilliant example of this alternative perspective may be seen in Ashis Nandy’s *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of the Self under Colonialism* (1983). Nandy begins by exploring the homology between sexual and political dominance as this took shape in the context of British colonialism in India. He then goes on to consider Indian literary efforts to react against colonialism that were in fact highly hegemonized, works that were “grounded in reinterpreted sacred texts but in reality dependent on core values [particularly of hypermasculinity] borrowed from the colonial world view and then legitimized according to existing concepts of sacredness” (22). But the book primarily examines individual literary, religious, and political figures who sought “to create a new political awareness which would combine a critical

awareness of Hinduism and colonialism with cultural and individual authenticity” (27). Nandy is particularly interested in the ways in which Gandhi and other major voices of anticolonialism mobilized (and partly reordered) Indian categories of masculinity, femininity, and androgyny in formulating both resistance to colonialism and an alternative vision of society. Again and again he views these oppositional figures, even when severely victimized in their personal lives (see especially the discussion of Sri Aurobindo), as drawing upon cultural resources to transform their own victimhood and articulate new models of self and society.¹¹

Nandy then comes back to the ordinary person who does not write novels, launch new religious systems, or lead movements of national resistance. In this context he seems to come close to the position of the authors of “‘Shahbano’” for he argues (in a more psychological language) that cultural and psychological survival may require the kind of fragmented and shifting self that Shahbano seemed to display (1983:107). Yet Nandy’s discussion has a different tone. Partly this comes from his earlier exploration of broad cultural patterns, showing that the boundaries between such things as self and other, masculine and feminine, and myth and history, are both differently configured and differently valued in various strands of Indian thought. The shifting subject in turn is both drawing on and protecting these alternative cultural frames, as opposed to making a seemingly ad hoc response to an immediate situation of domination. Nandy’s subjects also paradoxically retain a kind of coherent agency in their very inconstancy: “these ‘personality failures’ of the Indian could be another form of developed vigilance, or sharpened instinct or faster reaction to man-made suffering. They come . . . from a certain talent for and faith in life” (110). Thus Nandy’s subjects, whether prominent public figures or common men and women, retain powerful voices throughout his book, while Shahbano representationally disappears.

Finally, however, it must be emphasized that the question of adequate representation of subjects in the attempt to understand resistance is not purely a matter of providing better portraits of subjects in and of themselves. The importance of subjects (whether individual actors or social entities) lies not so much in who they are and how they are put together as in the projects that they construct and enact. For it is in the formulation and enactment of those projects that they both become and transform who they are, and that they sustain or transform their social and cultural universe.

Textual Resistance

Running through all these works, despite in some cases deep theoretical differences between them, is a kind of bizarre refusal to know and speak and write of the lived worlds inhabited by those who resist (or do not, as the case may be). Of the works discussed at length in this essay, Clendinnen's goes to greater lengths than the others to portray the precolonial Maya world in some depth and complexity, yet in the end she chooses to pull her punches and smooth over what the material has told her. But Scott, Guha, and Pathak and Rajan quite literally refuse to deal with the material that would allow entry into the political and cultural worlds of those they discuss. The "flying letters" of Scott's peasants, the testimonies of Guha's peasants' visions, the press interviews of Shahbano are texts that can be read in the richest sense to yield an understanding of both the meanings and the mystifications on which people are operating. What might emerge is something like what we see in Carlo Ginzburg's *Night Battles* (1985): an extraordinarily rich and complicated world of beliefs, practices, and petty politics whose stance toward the encroachment of Christianity and the Inquisition in the Middle Ages is confused and unheroic yet also poignantly stubborn and "authentic"—a very Nandyesque story.

There are no doubt many reasons for this interpretive refusal. But one is surely to be found in the so-called crisis of representation in the human sciences. When Edward Said (1979) says in effect that the discourse of Orientalism renders it virtually impossible to know anything real about the Orient; when Gayatri Spivak tells us that "the subaltern cannot speak" (1988a); when James Clifford informs us that all ethnographies are "fictions" (1986:7); and when of course in some sense all of these things are true—then the effect is a powerful inhibition on the practice of ethnography broadly defined: the effortful practice, despite all that, of seeking to understand other peoples in other times and places, especially those people who are not in dominant positions.

The ethnographic stance holds that ethnography is never impossible. This is the case because people not only resist political domination; they resist, or anyway evade, textual domination as well. The notion that colonial or academic texts are able completely to distort or exclude the voices and perspectives of those being written about seems to me to endow these texts with far

greater power than they have. Many things shape these texts, including—dare one say it?—the point of view of those being written about. Nor does one need to resort to various forms of textual experimentation to allow this to happen—it is happening all the time. Of course there is variation in the degree to which different authors and different forms of writing allow this process to show, and it is certainly worthwhile to reflect, as Clifford and others have done, on the ways in which this process can be enhanced. But it seems to me grotesque to insist on the notion that the text is shaped by everything but the lived reality of the people whom the text claims to represent.

Take the case of a female suicide discussed in Spivak's famous essay, the one that concludes with the statement that "the subaltern cannot speak" (1988a: 308). It is perhaps more difficult for any voice to break through Spivak's theorizing than through the most typifying ethnography; yet even this dead young woman, who spoke to no one about her intentions and left no note before her death, forces Spivak to at least try to articulate, in quite a "realist" and "objectivist" fashion, the truth of the suicide from the woman's point of view:

The suicide was a puzzle since, as Bhuvanewari was menstruating at the time, it was clearly not a case of illicit pregnancy. Nearly a decade later, it was discovered that she was a member of one of the many groups involved in the armed struggle for Indian independence. She had finally been entrusted with a political assassination. Unable to confront the task and yet aware of the practical need for trust, she killed herself.

Bhuvanewari had known that her death would be diagnosed as the outcome of illegitimate passion. She had therefore waited for the onset of menstruation . . . Bhuvanewari Bhaduri's suicide is an unemphatic, ad hoc, subaltern rewriting of the social text of *sati*-suicide (1988a:307–8).

With this discussion, it seems to me, Spivak undermines her own position (see also Coronil 1992). Combining a bit of homely interpretation of the text of the woman's body (the fact that she was menstruating) with a bit of objective history (the woman's participation in a radical political group), Spivak arrives at what any good ethnography provides: an understanding both of the meaning and the politics of the meaning of an event.

Another angle on the problem of ethnographic refusal may be gained from considering the implications of the fiction metaphor. Reverberating with ordinary language the fiction metaphor implies (though this is not exactly

what Clifford meant) that ethnographies are false, made up, and more generally are products of a literary imagination that has no obligation to engage with reality. Yet the obligation to engage with reality seems to me precisely the difference between the novelist's task and the ethnographer's (or the historian's). The anthropologist and the historian are charged with representing the lives of people who are living or once lived, and as we attempt to push these people into the molds of our texts, they push back. The final text is a product of our pushing and their pushing back, and no text, however dominant, lacks the traces of this counterforce.

Indeed, if the line between fiction and ethnography is being blurred, the blurring has had at least as much impact on fiction as on ethnography. The novelist's standard disclaimer—"any resemblance to persons living or dead is coincidental"—is less and less invoked,¹² or less and less accepted. The response to Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* (1989) shows in particularly dramatic form that the novelist can no longer pretend that, in contrast to ethnography or history, there is nobody on the other side of his or her text or that fiction can escape resistance.¹³

Finally, absolute fictionality and absolute silencing are impossible not only because those being written about force themselves into the author's account but also because there is always a multiplicity of accounts. The point seems simple, yet it seems to get lost in the discussions just considered. It is strange in this era of the theoretical "death of the author" to find theorists like Spivak and Clifford acting as if texts were wholly self-contained, as if every text one wrote had to embody (or could conceivably embody) in itself all the voices out there, or as if every text one read had boundaries beyond which one were not allowed to look. On the contrary in both writing and reading one enters a corpus of texts in which, in reality, a single representation or misrepresentation or omission never goes unchallenged. Our job, in both reading and writing, is precisely to refuse to be limited by a single text or by any existing definition of what should count as the corpus, and to play the texts (which may include, but never be limited to, our own field notes) off against one another in an endless process of coaxing up images of the real.

Conclusions

The point of this essay can be stated very simply. Resistance studies are thin because they are ethnographically thin: thin on the internal politics of dominated groups, thin on the cultural richness of those groups, thin on the

subjectivity—the intentions, desires, fears, projects—of the actors engaged in these dramas. Ethnographic thinness in turn derives from several sources (other than sheer bad ethnography, of course, which is always a possibility). The first is the failure of nerve surrounding questions of the internal politics of dominated groups and of the cultural authenticity of those groups, which I have raised periodically throughout this essay. The second is the set of issues surrounding the crisis of representation—the possibility of truthful portrayals of others (or Others) and the capacity of the subaltern to be heard—which has just been addressed. Taken together the two sets of issues converge to produce a kind of ethnographic black hole.

Filling in the black hole would certainly deepen and enrich resistance studies, but there is more to it than that. It would, or should, reveal the ambivalences and ambiguities of resistance itself. These ambivalences and ambiguities, in turn, emerge from the intricate webs of articulations and disarticulations that always exist between dominant and dominated. For, the politics of external domination and the politics within a subordinated group may link up with, as well as repel, one another; the cultures of dominant groups and of subalterns may speak to, even while speaking against, one another;¹⁴ and, as Nandy so eloquently argues, subordinated selves may retain oppositional authenticity and agency by drawing on aspects of the dominant culture to criticize their own world as well as the situation of domination. In short, one can only appreciate the ways in which resistance can be more than opposition, can be truly creative and transformative, if one appreciates the multiplicity of projects in which social beings are always engaged, and the multiplicity of ways in which those projects feed on, as well as collide with, one another.