Ethnologies

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Undoing Culture: Globalization, Postmodernism and Identity. By Mike Featherstone. (London: Sage, in association with Theory, Culture and Society, School of Human Studies, University of Teesside, 1995. Pp. x + 178, index, preface, references, ISBN 0-8039-7606-2 pbk.)

Mikel J. Koven

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Mike Featherstone ends his latest piece of postmodern sociology where he perhaps should have started: "It is this process of mobility and migrancy, now labelled postmodern by some, which is held to be both the methodological key and the actuality of the contemporary world" (p. 154). What Featherstone seems to be arguing is that of all the aspects of postmodernism, aspects which Cultural Studies scholars usually appropriate for discussions of elite culture, or at least elitification of culture, the issues surrounding "mobility and migrancy" are the most useful to discuss how everyday life is impacted by postmodernity. That being said, there are several problems which should become readily apparent: first, that postmodernism theorizes, a priori, a cultural condition; that this condition is global in scope (an aspect of postmodernism I've always found ironic, since we are supposed to be resisting theories of plenitude); and that since postmodernity exists and is global, there must be some way in which every culture experiences the condition. Sociologists have fought for centuries over their own national and local cultures, and the definitions of local and national culture which Featherstone frequently cites, but in one slim volume *Undoing Culture* attempts to create a paradigm for every culture on the planet.

To be sure, I think Featherstone is correct in many of his observations. For example:

> The process of globalization, then, does not seem to be producing cultural uniformity; rather it makes us aware of new levels of diversity. If there is a global culture it would be better to conceive of it not as a common culture, but as a field in which differences, power struggles and cultural prestige contests are played out (p. 13-14).

Featherstone includes among these "new levels of diversity" the emergence of ethnic voices and the resistance of ethnocentric analysis. Fair enough. But where postmodernism in fields like sociology are just beginning to get excited about the erasure of nationalistic frameworks in favour of more localized ontologies, ethnographic sciences, of which I thought sociology was one, have been discussing this for decades. "With postmodernism, there is a re-emergence of the vernacular, of representational forms, with the use of pastiche and playful collaging of styles and traditions. In short, there is a return

to local cultures, and the emphasis should be placed upon local cultures in the plural, the fact that they can be placed alongside each other without hierarchical distinction" (p. 96).

The interstitial perspective that Featherstone appears to be working towards, that of postmodernity in global culture, can be summarized in six basic points:

> First, we can point to the attitude of immersion in a local culture...Second, such communities, which are increasingly becoming drawn into the global figuration, will also have to cope periodically with the refugees from modernization, those members of ethnic groups who are romantically attracted to the perceived authenticity of a simpler life and sense of "home"...Third, variants of the refurbished imagined community also exist in the rediscovery of ethnicity and regional cultures within the current phase of a number of Western nation-states which seek to allow a greater recognition of regional and local diversity and multiculturalism...Fourth, those locals who travel, such as expatriates, usually take their local culture with them...Fifth, there are those whose local affiliation is limited, whose geographical mobility and professional culture is such that they display a cosmopolitan orientation...[And] [s]ixth, there are cosmopolitan intellectuals and cultural intermediaries, especially those from the post-Second World War generation, who do not seek to judge local cultures in terms of their progress towards some ideal derived from modernity, but are content to interpret them for growing audiences of those who have been through higher education within the new middle class and wider audiences within consumer culture (p. 97-99).

I am willing to provisionally accept Featherstone's points one to four; however, ethnographic research is needed in order to prove these. It is here that *Undoing Culture* is ultimately undone: the absence of any kind of fieldwork, of any voices outside of the academy, makes me question the validity of this kind of "top-down" theorizing. I am willing to believe that global postmodernity affects all cultures and perhaps this is characterized by "mobility and migrancy" of peoples and their adaptability to new environments, although I would question how modern such a dynamic is, let alone *post*modern. It is Featherstone's efficacy regarding "images of imaginary homes/homelands" (p. 144) that I specifically need to see proved ethnographically.

It is Featherstone's points five and six which further break down the applicability of his argument of globalization of postmodernism. Even though *I* may be just such a cosmopolitan migrant, I would be considered elite in the grand scheme of the world which is the book's frame. I do not know how applicable his points five and six are to underemployed fishermen in

Newfoundland, or to "the wild men of Borneo". Featherstone is attempting to generalize, in the worst excesses of ethnocentrism, based on his own frame of reference, (which, let's face it, is not something we can condemn in its own right) but by calling such a generalization "postmodern" and not backing such a statement up with ethnographic evidence is ivory-tower elitism at its worst.

I think Featherstone's thesis is too minor and his referencing too scattershot to engage someone unfamiliar with postmodern theory. Unfortunately, for those with experienced postmodern interests, his insistence upon referencing every step along his path may be found to be as uncomfortably pedantic and plodding as I experienced it. For me the intellectual payoff in the second half of the book was not worth the effort it took to get through the first half. That being said, perhaps some exciting ethnographic work can now be initiated in response to Featherstone's theorizing. This book, then, is one place to start looking for potential questions. *Undoing Cultures* gives no answers, and is unclear on what the questions are outside of a global sociological framework.

MIKEL J. KOVEN
Memorial University of Newfoundland
St. John's, Newfoundland

Indian Story and Song from North America. By Alice Fletcher. (1900; rpt. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995. Pp. xxvii + 126, new introduction by Helen Myers, 16 p., bibliography, musical transcriptions with piano arrangements, $6.95 US, ISBN 0-8032-6888-2 pbk.)

The recent work of George W. Stocking, Jr. and others on the history of anthropology has stimulated a surge of interest in the old ethnographic texts and their authors (Stocking 1985-1991; Sanjek 1990; Van Maanen 1988). It has also inspired a number of publishers to re-issue some of the classic anthropological monographs. Since 1992, for example, the University of Nebraska Press has reprinted four monographs by Alice Fletcher (1828-1923), with new introductions by various reputable scholars. The most recent of these, *Indian Song and Story from North American*, originally published in 1900, is the subject of this review.