

## The Thin Within the Thick: Social History, Postmodern Ethnography, and Textual Practice

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JOY PARR'S *The Gender of Breadwinners*<sup>1</sup> and Franca Iacovetta's *Such Hardworking People*<sup>2</sup> are two recent works of Canadian social history that have received much commentary and praise since their publication, not least for their careful and selective use of postmodern theoretical perspectives. While both authors use some elements of a postmodern perspective to advantage in developing their theoretical arguments, however, they fail to extend sufficiently a postmodern sensibility to their treatment of textual representation, authorial voice, and stylistic form. Rather than employing the methodological and representational strategies of postmodern ethnography that would be commensurate with their theoretical perspectives, both Parr and Iacovetta maintain a lingering commitment to Clifford Geertz's interpretive strategy of "thick description",<sup>3</sup> which has been so popular with "new" social historians writing "history from below".<sup>4</sup> The result is that neither *The Gender of Breadwinners* nor *Such Hardworking People* deals sufficiently with what postmodern theorists commonly realize: that the form and content

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1 Joy Parr, *The Gender of Breadwinners: Women, Men, and Change in Two Industrial Towns, 1880–1950* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990).

2 Franca Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People: Italian Immigrants in Postwar Toronto* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992).

3 Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture", in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

4 For discussions on the extensive and foundational impact of Geertz's work on the practice of social history, see A. Biersack, "Local Knowledge, Local History: Geertz and Beyond", in L. Hunt, ed., *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); P. Burke, *History and Social Theory* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1992); Natalie Davis, "Religion and Capitalism Once Again? Jewish Merchant Culture in the Seventeenth Century", *Representations*, vol. 59 (Summer 1997), pp. 56–84; William Sewell, "Geertz and History: From Synchrony to Transformation", *Representations*, vol. 59 (Summer 1997), pp. 35–55; Jim Sharpe, "History from Below", in P. Burke, ed., *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992); R. Walters, "Signs of the Times: Clifford Geertz and Historians", *Social Research*, vol. 47 (Fall 1980), pp. 537–556.

of cultural representations (including published social histories) are politically embodied in, and thus play a role in perpetuating, relations of power, domination, and resistance. Although Parr's and Iacovetta's social histories are empirically and theoretically revisionist, their texts may retain an oppressive effect because they fail to consider adequately the enabling and constraining consequences of their representational strategies. A critique of the stylistic and representational form of these two books may lead us to a larger postmodern endeavour to imagine — if not actually produce — social histories and ethnographies with more emancipatory and less “othering” potential.<sup>5</sup>

### **Parr and Iacovetta as Influential Social Historians**

Both Joy Parr and Franca Iacovetta have received international recognition for their detailed and ground-breaking social histories.<sup>6</sup> Each author has been praised for her textually rich, beautifully written, and creatively researched monographs and for contributing major insights to various strands of social history. They have been complimented especially for their novel historiographic approaches. The recognition of Parr's and Iacovetta's work as innovative within the discipline of social history makes these monographs important sites for critical examination of stylistic forms and textual construction.

Joy Parr was awarded the Canadian Historical Association's MacDonald Prize for her book *The Gender of Breadwinners* — a comparative study of the gendered work experience in Paris and Hanover, Ontario, in the early twentieth century — due to its significant theoretical and methodological contributions to the fields of women's, feminist, regional, labour, working-class, and industrial history.<sup>7</sup> She claims that the theoretical goal of the book is a “reconsideration of elements of neo-classical and Marxian analyses ... from the perspective of feminist theory, particularly the recent post-structuralist critiques of the categoricism within which the study of class and gender relations in industrial society has been framed”.<sup>8</sup> Parr rejects “an

5 Although postmodern ethnographers agree that a quintessential postmodern ethnography does not exist, the following are cited frequently as recent writings that respond to the crisis of representation: M. Cesara, *Reflections of a Woman Anthropologist: No Hiding Place* (New York: Academic, 1982); Vincent Crapanzano, *Tuhami: Portrait of a Moroccan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); I. Majnep and R. Bulmer, *Birds of My Kalam County* (Auckland, N.Z.: Auckland University Press, 1977); Marjorie Shostak, *Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981); D. Tedlock, *The Spoken Word and the Work of Interpretation* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983).

6 See, for example, C. Heron, “Reviews”, *Canadian Historical Review*, vol. 72, no. 2 (1991), pp. 218–221; G. Pozzetta, “Reviews”, *Canadian Historical Review*, vol. 74, no. 4 (1993), pp. 645–646; E. Scheinberg, “Book Reviews”, *Archivaria*, vol. 32 (1991), pp. 173–175. Not all reviews of their work have been positive. See, for example, Brian Palmer, “The Poverty of Theory Revisited: Or, Critical Theory, Historical Materialism, and the Ostensible End of Marxism”, *Left History*, vol. 1, no. 1 (1995), pp. 67–101, for a Marxist critique of Parr's *The Gender of Breadwinners*.

7 Scheinberg, “Book Reviews”, *Archivaria*.

8 Parr, *The Gender of Breadwinners*, p. 6.

ahistorical hierarchy of oppressions”<sup>9</sup> in her investigations of “the relationships among industry, domesticity, and community”<sup>10</sup> by utilizing a post-structural theoretical framework which highlights the multiple ways in which the social experiences of women and men are structured simultaneously, unpredictably, and contingently by class and gender. Parr chooses this theoretical framework to avoid an emphasis on fixed dualisms, to “problematise and unmake the chain of binary oppositions — masculine/feminine, market/non-market, public/private, waged/non-waged — and rethink the categoricism that canonises gender, class, race, ethnicity, and nationality”.<sup>11</sup> She argues that the social organizing principles of ethnicity, religion, nationality, and cultural background intersect with class to form an intricate social network that influences the development of specific gender relations.

Three of Parr’s substantive findings illustrate this intricate web of social relations. First, she demonstrates the internal diversity of social relations in both Paris and Hanover, diversities that were unstable and shifting through time as well as over space due to the specific, local, and variable nature of articulations. By recognizing the specificity and diversity of social relations in a particular time and place, as opposed to presuming overarching, static social practices, Parr constructs “explanations that more fully comprehend both the access to power and the grounds upon which this access ... has been challenged”.<sup>12</sup>

Second, and more specifically, Parr reveals that gender relations cannot be explained without the confounding, constituting, and shifting influence of class and ethnic relations. For example, she explores how jobs in each town were assigned by gender entitlements, how female waged work was accommodated by reconstituting household boundaries, duties, and obligations, and how gender and “Germanness” created certain community economic opportunities and community roots. As a result, Parr modifies the term “work”, liberating it from a traditionally monolithic and patriarchal formulation.

Finally, Parr’s focus on men, masculinity, and the manliness of work illustrates that constructs of masculinity and work were neither unitary nor fixed in the Hanover community. Manliness was a shifting “severalty” depending on class, age, religion, and the immediacy of household responsibilities. By noting that manly worth on the job was not adequately distilled in a paycheque in the minds of male employees, Parr places waged labour in a complex web of gender, class, and ethnic relations. She argues, “[T]he simultaneity of these ways of being was inescapable, and from this simultaneity followed heterogeneity. Neither manliness, nor womanliness, worker

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 231.

or boss, native nor newcomer was a unitary condition; each comprehended diverse possibilities and practices.”<sup>13</sup>

Parr relies on an innovative methodological blend of an array of imaginative sources to demonstrate her theoretical claims. Her careful and thorough use of sources, which range from company records (payrolls, minute books, personnel and appraisal reports, and industrial relations files), union reports, business records, and government documents to local newspapers, trade journals, census reports, and municipal assessment rolls, has led critics to identify her as a meticulous and creative social historian. Many commentators see as key the 60 oral histories Parr collected for this project. Scheinberg, for example, claims that the “use of oral history enables her to piece together portions of these workers’ lives that would not have been accessible through the use of primary documents alone. These testimonials also enable Parr to interpret her subjects’ experiences at the individual level, thus adding a much more personal and authentic quality to her study.”<sup>14</sup> Parr’s novel methodological and theoretical strategies provide a “model for a more sensitive and rigorous social history. [She pushes] us onto new terrain where gender is neither ignored nor is it given a monocausal explanatory force, and where its specific context is crucial.”<sup>15</sup>

Franca Iacovetta’s work on postwar (1947–1965) southern Italian immigration to Toronto is also heralded as a welcome and refreshing change in urban, ethnic, immigration, working-class, women’s, and feminist history. *Such Hardworking People*, part of the McGill-Queen’s University Press series “Studies in Ethnic History”, gains much of its originality from Iacovetta’s emphasis on the “dialectical nature of the adjustment process” of Italian immigrants and her attempt to amend the “major gender imbalance in the historical literature on immigrants by devoting considerable attention to women”.<sup>16</sup> An examination of both the race relations between postwar Italian immigrants and Torontonians of that era and immigrant militancy are additional perceptive theoretical elements. In particular, Iacovetta’s emphasis on the interrelationships between class, ethnicity, and gender in the immigration experience, a poststructural focus similar to that employed by Parr, is “a decided contribution to the evolving literature on postwar immigration and settlement in North America”.<sup>17</sup>

Iacovetta makes three substantive contributions to the strands of social history listed above. First, because she attends to the interrelationships within a specific postwar Italian immigrant population, she is able to repudiate the prevalent historical characterization of various immigrant groups as undifferentiated masses.<sup>18</sup> By demonstrating the regional, gender, and class-

13 *Ibid.*, pp. 245–246.

14 Scheinberg, “Book Reviews”, *Archivaria*, p. 173.

15 Heron, “Reviews”, *Canadian Historical Review*, p. 221.

16 Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People*, pp. xxvi–xxvii.

17 Pozzetta, “Reviews”, *Canadian Historical Review*, pp. 645–646.

18 *Ibid.*

based differences within this population, she directs attention to how women and men experienced immigration and cultural adjustment in different ways. Postwar southern Italian immigrants to Toronto were distinguished by their particular location within various tension-filled and non-linear adjustment processes, making the immigrant experience multilayered in character.

Second, Iacovetta develops an analysis of the diverse strategies immigrants employed to deal with their harsh economic and cultural (often racist) circumstances. She investigates the critical role women played in these processes through their position in the community, the workplace, and the family (an economy that was central to both women's and men's experiences). In particular, she notes how women made strategic use of social and welfare services, in addition to kinship networks, to develop self-help structures within the community. Iacovetta thus concludes that migrants selectively adopted traditional values and practices that could fortify their families in a dialectic between elements of Old and New World societies. In reaction to the hardships and strains of adjustment processes, families pooled their resources and worked to reconstitute a cultural community in their neighbourhoods. Thus, neither women nor men were passive in these processes. They exercised choice over how they lived their lives, especially by resisting racism and their exploitation in waged labour. The complexity of these individual lives demonstrates the inadequacy of the dichotomy between heroic and victimized immigrants. Rather, Iacovetta calls for an "analysis of the dialectic that goes beyond this dualism".<sup>19</sup>

Third, Iacovetta constructs a feminist-informed history in which gender is not simply added on, but constitutes a central category in the analysis of human experience and organization, through her inclusion of gender — together with class and ethnicity — as a social organizing principle in both the "home" and host society. Two examples must suffice. Iacovetta recounts that Italian women were recruited as domestic servants (the most ghettoized type of female waged labour) by the Canadian government in 1951 and 1952. Northern Italians were preferred, but all Italians were paid lower wages than their British, German, and Dutch counterparts. She also illustrates the articulation of gender, class, and ethnic relations in the change in the ability of Italian men to provide a "family wage". When in Italy, these men had prided themselves on their status as family breadwinners. However, their disadvantaged class and ethnic position, in addition to their cooperative work ethic, prompted them to override their patriarchal claim on waged labour and publicly applaud their women for the necessary and significant contribution their wages made to a family's well-being.

Like Parr, Iacovetta uses diverse empirical sources (media accounts, government documents, public and church archives, social work case records) and combines them innovatively with the more typically ethnographic tech-

<sup>19</sup> Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People*, p. 201.

niques of participant observation and detailed interviews with 70 life historians.<sup>20</sup> Consequently, she is able to triangulate her data, enhance the subjective side of the immigration story, and provide an intimately detailed picture of the experience of immigration.

In summary, *The Gender of Breadwinners* and *Such Hardworking People* are revisionist works that extend the boundaries of social historical practice. Despite the efforts both authors make to incorporate postmodern theoretical features — the decentring of class by Parr and a feminist reworking by Iacovetta — they do not address other postmodern concerns. In particular, they neglect questions about authorship and textual representation, namely the “crisis of representation”.

### **Social Histories and the Crisis of Representation**

Although Parr and Iacovetta have received considerable praise for their social histories, critics have commented on their “dense and sometimes cryptic” styles,<sup>21</sup> noting in particular that “more information on the principles underlying the production and the use of the many oral histories would have been helpful”.<sup>22</sup> I, too, found myself searching for more guidance as I read these books. As I flipped repeatedly to the endnotes to discern what information had been gleaned from which sources, I became frustrated with the invisibility of the life historians upon whose words the texts were, to a considerable extent, founded. While a few pseudonyms appear in Iacovetta’s text, Parr relegates the authors of her testimonial sources to endnotes. Both authors’ narratives are formulaic and linear storylines largely unbroken by the utterances of others. This stylistic form submerges the names and voices of the life historians and their specific insights and experiences. The unacknowledged reliance on an adapted version of “thick description” disposes these social histories to an oppressive textual form that privileges a singular authorial narrative by concealing the historians’ voices and the differences between their thoughts and experiences. Although social history and interpretive anthropology obviously differ in practice, most notably in their temporal emphases and some of their primary sources, their shared goals of cultural interpretation and analysis and their reliance on Geertz’s work strengthen their commonalities.

Geertz’s formulation of “thick description” was enthusiastically employed by social historians in the 1970s for three main reasons. First, it provided a guide to contextualization for micro-historians, the means of “placing a social event within its full cultural context so that it can be studied on an

20 I borrow the term “life historian” from Marjorie Mbilinyi, “I’d Have Been a Man: Politics and the Labour Process in the Production of Personal Narratives”, in Personal Narratives Group, ed., *Interpreting Women’s Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), who recommends it as an alternative to the objectifying labels “informant” or “subject”.

21 J. Guilford, “Book Reviews”, *Atlantis*, vol. 17, no. 1 (1991), pp. 140–141.

22 Pozzetta, “Reviews”, *Canadian Historical Review*, p. 646.

analytical level rather than a merely descriptive one".<sup>23</sup> This analytical and contextual strategy stems from Geertz's claim that cultural events can be understood only as parts of a cultural whole, or the contexts within which they occur. Second, it offered historians a guide to recording the meanings and values of a culture, as well as a way of tracing the interaction and interrelation of cultural elements with other institutions that operate in the reproduction of a society. According to Geertz, the meaning of a cultural incident can only be interpreted once it is placed within its wider cultural setting. Underlying such an act of interpretation is the principle that it is possible to grasp the "inner nature" of the culture in question by highlighting not individual actors or their actions, but the cultural rules that actors follow in order to "make" meanings of cultural components.<sup>24</sup> Third, social historians are provided with what William Sewell terms an "epistemological guarantee" through Geertz's claim that "culture" and cultural meanings (the objects of analysis within thick description) are not located solely in the cultural actor, but are also embedded in publicly available cultural symbolic forms such as language, rituals, artifacts, and etiquette.<sup>25</sup> Social historians, who often study the dead and therefore cannot directly experience past cultures, can gain access to them through Geertz's conceptualization of "culture", since "some of the symbolic forms through which the dead experienced their world are available to us in surviving documents — often piecemeal and secondhand, to be sure, but by no means beyond recovery".<sup>26</sup> Twenty years later, Geertz's concepts of "culture" and "thick description" have permeated much social history in practice, if not explicitly, because they ostensibly resolve many of social history's most troubling dilemmas. Although social historians have benefited by adopting this interpretive anthropological framework, they have also been left with some problematic aspects of interpretive anthropology, especially those pertaining to the textual form of ethnographies and the denial of difference.

Parr and Iacovetta employ four textual strategies that both exemplify these aspects of "thick description" and exacerbate the problem of difference and representation:<sup>27</sup> evoking everyday experiences through mimetic description; masking cultural difference and confusion as opposed to highlighting the actions and experiences of specific individuals; invoking interpretive

23 Sharpe, "History from Below", p. 35.

24 D. Jacobson, *Reading Ethnography* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).

25 Sewell, "Geertz and History", p. 39.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 39.

27 In most of his work Geertz is concerned with difference at a macro-cultural level, while he leaves the internal differences and variations in a culture's beliefs and values unexplored. Consequently, he "usually brackets such difference in his texts. The difference he emphasises is that *between* societies or peoples.... It is remarkable how frequently Geertz makes assertions about "the Balinese", "the Javanese", "the Berbers" ... without considering the possibility that there are culturally important differences within these categories — of outlook, belief, and comportment, or of wealth, gender, power and status" (Sewell, "Geertz and History", p. 50).

textual authority; and assuming that language is adequate to the task of revealing and imitating reality. Deconstructing the textual form of these social histories helps to reveal these problematic stylistic elements that have been incorporated, perhaps inadvertently, from “thick description”.<sup>28</sup>

My previous use of the word “formulaic” to describe the narrative style Parr and Iacovetta use alludes to the problem of the programmatic nature of what I will subsequently refer to as their “thick descriptions”. In his discussion of the paradoxes of description, Michel Beaujour notes that descriptions are frequently mimetic; they simply imitate that which they set out to describe.<sup>29</sup> Mimesis renders the description a mere stereotype or anecdote, the “typical”. Beaujour argues, “As description reaches toward readability, the text is drawn into generic typicalness, its ‘truth’ reduced to the versimilitude of the commonplace.”<sup>30</sup> Vincent Crapanzano makes a similar claim about Geertz’s concept of thick description:

Events are not presented in their particularity as single, unique performances. [We are given] a general picture. Presumably many observations, taken from many vantage points, are conflated into a single, constructed performance which becomes a sort of ideal, a Platonic performance. It gives the illusion of specificity where there is no specific temporal or spatial vantage point.<sup>31</sup>

John Van Maanen adds that the typification of cultural performances reduces cultural routines to formulas, since thick descriptions require confusions to be glossed over to produce a fluid narrative whole.<sup>32</sup> The whole, in turn, tends to forestall alternative interpretations. For example, Parr’s descriptions of “Womanly militance” and “Manly craftsmanship” construct generic prototypes of workers responding to forced changes in work organization.<sup>33</sup> Although these “voices” are liberatory in their content, without the particular and possibly dissenting voices of individual workers, readers are left to imagine that all labourers fit Parr’s prototypical description. Similarly, when Iacovetta describes the racism suffered by “ethnic intruders and hardworking exotics” upon their arrival in Toronto, she presents it as if it had been experienced similarly, if not identically, by all postwar Italian immigrants.<sup>34</sup> This

28 Some of these elements could, alternatively, be artifacts of a lingering structuralism in these post-structural analyses. However, too many textual elements coincide with those of thick description to be explained fully by that diagnosis. I am indebted to David Butz for this insight.

29 Michel Beaujour, “Some Paradoxes of Description”, *Yale French Studies*, vol. 6 (1981), p. 52.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 53.

31 Vincent Crapanzano, “Hermes’ Dilemma: The Masking of Subversion in Ethnographic Description”, in James Clifford and George Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p. 75.

32 John Van Maanen, “Escape from Modernity: On the Ethnography of Repair to the Repair of Ethnography”, *Human Studies*, vol. 13, no. 3 (1990), pp. 275–284.

33 Parr, *The Gender of Breadwinners*, pp. 96, 140.

34 Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People*, p. 101.



typification contrasts sharply with her theoretical insight that Italian immigrants were not a homogeneous mass, but had varying experiences due to their different gender, class, and ethnic locations. The programmatic nature of thick descriptions such as these points to a second major textual problem: the masking of cultural difference and confusion by the omission of actions and experiences of specific individuals.

Roger Keesing argues that all knowledge within a particular culture is “distributed and controlled”: that is, “who knows what” affects how members of varying ages, genders, and expertises read and construct cultural incidents, and which of their interpretations, if any, gains hegemonic ascendancy.<sup>35</sup> Keesing contends that, by omitting these complex and messy dynamics from their descriptions, ethnographers of all disciplines portray cultures as collectively constructed entities with collectively constructed meanings. This depiction in turn reifies cultures, confounding our understanding of their contested and negotiated nature. Any cultural composite of meaning obscures difference and confusion by denying that different cultural members can attribute different meanings to the same event depending on their relationship to the cultural knowledge of the event. For example, Crapanzano argues that, when Geertz attempts to clarify the Balinese cockfight through a thick description of its single objective meaning, he avoids such questions as: Whose meaning is it (“all Balinese, all Balinese men, or any Balinese men in particular”)? Whose everyday experiences does it articulate? To whom does the description make sense?<sup>36</sup> Parr’s and Iacovetta’s analyses raise similar questions. I was concerned, for example, by Iacovetta’s depiction of housewives in the Italian community in postwar Toronto as homogeneously resourceful women who quickly “adopted a pragmatic and selective approach towards [government-funded social service] agencies”.<sup>37</sup> Equally problematic is her uniform characterization of Italian parishioners who unanimously “opposed the liturgical reforms, but for pragmatic reasons. They feared that by replacing the Latin mass with masses in English and Italian, the two-tiered system would never disappear and the Italians would never be invited upstairs.”<sup>38</sup> Parr, likewise, argues, “Fearful of their jobs and without support from the hierarchy of their union ... the employees at the Knechtel main plant vented their growing frustration with covert action.”<sup>39</sup> In each instance the question of whose experience these cultural representations articulated is never addressed.

In summary, James Clifford refers to these types of supposedly systematic cultural reconstructions as an “orderly process of collecting and recording

35 Roger Keesing, “Anthropology as Interpretive Quest”, *Current Anthropology*, vol. 28, no. 2 (1987), p. 161.

36 Crapanzano, “Hermes’ Dilemma”, p. 72.

37 Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People*, p. 127.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 136.

39 Parr, *The Gender of Breadwinners*, p. 159.

with no sense of improvisation in the midst of competing, distracting messages and influences".<sup>40</sup> He asserts that thick descriptions gloss over cultural confusions by ignoring the disorderly nature of fieldwork — those dissenting voices, experiences, and practices — and its translation into field notes. This denial allows ethnographers to "select and foreshorten perceptions and statements in ways that constitute an objective, uncontested world of interpretations".<sup>41</sup>

Parr and Iacovetta deny the messiness of collecting, recording, and translating their sources by taking their strategies of textual construction for granted. This neglect is especially apparent in their failure to provide us with an explicit disclosure on the oral histories or life historians' discourses. The omission has two profound repercussions. First, it conceals the fact that the text is a story, a fiction, "in the root sense of things made, composed, fashioned".<sup>42</sup> Despite its sensitivity to historical contingency and multiple identities, each narrative appears to reveal a singular "truth", which in turn bestows credibility to its author. Second, because the authors do not reflect on how the texts are constructed, we hear only a settled, omnipresent voice stating a coherent cultural interpretation. Although 60 to 70 life historians likely would relate different as well as similar thoughts, experiences, and interpretations of past events, both authors make subtle attempts to deny interpretive and experiential difference. For example, after citing one personal interview, Iacovetta claims, "Similar examples emerged in the oral testimonies of many of the informants."<sup>43</sup> Using a slightly different approach, Parr lists the pseudonyms of life historians who expressed similar ideas or recounted corresponding experiences in her endnotes. Neither author divulges dissonant voices or alternative interpretive or experiential knowledges. This denial of difference is especially pronounced in Parr's linear and monovocal treatment of the 1949 strike in Paris, which so deeply divided the local community due to class, gender, and cultural allegiances. Unless they examine how local knowledge is constructed, distributed, and legitimated, ethnographers and social historians alike cannot understand how those knowledges are a key to both power and cultural meaning.<sup>44</sup> If, as Foucault argues, knowledge and power are inextricably linked, it becomes clear that cultures "sustain the interests of some and work against the interests of others. We must, however, dig beneath the surface to seek counter-ideologies and cultural expression of subaltern struggle. The overlay of consensuality, viewed uncritically, can make an anthropology of meaning insidious as well as politically naive."<sup>45</sup>

40 James Clifford, "Notes on (Field)notes", in R. Sanjek, ed., *Fieldnotes: The Makings of Anthropology* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 54.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 67.

42 Stephen Greenblatt, "The Touch of the Real", *Representations*, vol. 59 (Summer 1997), p. 19.

43 Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People*, p. 233 n. 32.

44 T. Asad, "Anthropological Conceptions of Religion: Reflections on Geertz", *Man*, vol. 18 (1983), pp. 237–259.

45 Keesing, "Anthropology as Interpretive Quest", p. 166.

The third problematic textual strategy Parr and Iacovetta use in their thick descriptions is the type of ethnographic authority they construct. As post-modern and postcolonial theorists across disciplines continue to criticize acts of representation in general and those of cross-cultural representation in particular, they have become increasingly interested in developing new styles of cultural description and authority.<sup>46</sup> While it is impossible to avoid authority completely in historical and anthropological texts, as the author cannot and should not simply disappear, Clifford claims that some forms of textual authority provide better, although continually imperfect, cultural analyses. Although one form of authority usually predominates, Clifford argues that there are four modes discordantly at play in any ethnographic work: experiential, interpretive, dialogical, and polyphonic.<sup>47</sup> Parr and Iacovetta, like interpretive anthropologists, rely almost exclusively on the use of interpretive authority. Interpretive authority is predicated on a problematic dichotomy between observer and observed in which the linear narrative of the “transcendental observer” precludes the “mutual, dialogical production of a discourse” with the observed.<sup>48</sup> When the transcendental author suppresses the specific voices and experiences of life historians, she prevents textual dialogue that would provide supportive as well as discordant discourses on the social historian’s own discourse.

Clifford explains that any cultural interpretation that is fundamentally predicated on “reading” cultures as texts incorporates the problematic translation of cultural discourse into text. Speaking of anthropological fieldwork, he argues that this process involves two main stages. First, cultural discourse is seen or heard by the ethnographer in the field, where the life historian is present and actively communicates with the ethnographer. Second, translating discourse into text involves a process in which the ethnographer abstracts discourse from the site where it was uttered and places it in an interpretive framework free of the original speaker. As this communication is now masked, a “generalized” author must be invented, an “absolute subject” who, in formulating a coherent interpretation, excludes life historians, their voices, and the situational aspects of the ethnography. The author becomes an “omnipresent, knowledgeable exegete and spokesman” who singlehandedly interprets, contextualizes, and reads cultural meanings without any input from cultural members.<sup>49</sup>

46 See, for example, James Clifford, “Introduction: Partial Truths”, in Clifford and Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture*; Crapanzano, “Hermes’ Dilemma”; George Marcus and Michael Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); Trinh Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989); Edward Said, “Representing the Colonised: Anthropology’s Interlocutors”, *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 15, no. 2 (1989), pp. 205–225.

47 James Clifford, “On Ethnographic Authority”, *Representations*, vol. 1, no. 2 (1983), pp. 118–146.

48 Stephen Taylor, “Post-modern Ethnography: From Document of the Occult to Occult Document”, in Clifford and Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture*, pp. 126, 129.

49 Clifford, “On Ethnic Authority”, pp. 130–132.

Clifford's analysis has marked parallels with recent social historical practice, as Parr and Iacovetta exemplify. Although their authority pervades their texts, Parr and Iacovetta feign absence. By "bracketing" themselves out of the text, they continue to occlude how they construct text, take perspectives, and make choices. In reference to cross-cultural investigations, Trinh Minh-ha and Crapanzano suggest that an omnipresent author can create an "us" against "them" textual scenario.<sup>50</sup> Minh-ha argues, "A conversation of 'us' with 'us' about 'them' is a conversation in which 'them' is silenced. 'Them' always stands on the other side of the hill, naked and speechless, barely present in its absence."<sup>51</sup> Crapanzano adds that interpretive authority

represents a sort of asymmetrical we-relationship with the anthropologist behind and above the native, hidden but at the top of the hierarchy of understanding. There is never an I-you relationship, a dialogue, two people next to each other reading the same text, and discussing it face-to-face, but only an I-they relationship ... even the I disappears — replaced by an invisible voice of authority who declares what the you-transformed-to-a-they experience.<sup>52</sup>

Clifford refers to this type of veiled authority as "authorial transparency", the problematic belief that the author can actually disappear, leaving information open for objective perusal and voyeurism by "us".<sup>53</sup> Authors who hide in their texts promote, through their observations and interpretations, a search for the stereotypical Other/"them".

The fourth textual difficulty I detect in the thick descriptions of Parr and Iacovetta is the authors' assumption that language is adequate to the task of revealing and imitating reality. While most people share this assumption, postmodern scholars warn that we should not regard language as transparent nor consider it able to simulate life unproblematically. In his synopsis of the crisis of representation, for example, Edward Said notes that, due to lack of consensus on the meanings of signs, words and language do not comprise a transparent vehicle for meaning. Instead, "language [is] an opaque and yet strangely abstract, ungraspable essence" which acts to "neutralise and inhibit any attempt at representing reality mimetically".<sup>54</sup> This insight into the "ungraspable essence" of language reveals the problems inherent in all acts of solitary and exclusive interpretation of language, but especially the practice of thick description, since it is predicated on the principle of singular interpretation. It does so in two ways: in terms of the written and translated word.

Keesing argues that interpretive anthropology rests at its centre on the possibility of cultural transcription, the "thick" reading of a cultural text, and

50 Minh-ha, *Women, Native, Other*; Crapanzano, "Hermes' Dilemma".

51 Minh-ha, *Women, Native, Other*, p. 67.

52 Crapanzano, "Hermes' Dilemma", p. 74.

53 Clifford, "Notes on (Field)notes", p. 61.

54 Said, "Representing the Colonised", p. 206.

that herein lies its fundamental problem.<sup>55</sup> Like Said, he insists that language is extremely ambiguous. Parr and Iacovetta would undoubtedly agree, but they seem to ignore the problems that arise when numerous interpretations exist simultaneously in the same local culture about the same phenomenon. If individuals in a particular social, political, economic, cultural, and temporal location construct conflicting interpretations of their own culture, the number of possible interpretations made by people outside that context dramatically increases. The problem of cultural transcription raises further questions about the process of translation. If cultures are not coherent texts, as Keesing and others have demonstrated, but contested codes encompassing multiple discourses, then which perspective do you translate? Any composite, univocal thick description bypasses cultural polyvocality and the inability of language to describe a culture with certainty.

Clifford asserts that, instead of concentrating on describing, interpreting, and inscribing using field methods, cultural analysts would do better work by focusing on cultural analysis as an act of writing based on field notes. Once we view cultural accounts as textual constructs or fictions, they can no longer be taken as unproblematic interpretations that represent culture mimetically. He argues that

such a relation is always rhetorically (also historically and politically) mediated. Ethnography cannot, in practice, maintain a constant descriptive relationship to cultural phenomena. It can maintain such a relationship only to what is produced in field notes.... It is possible to be serious, truthful, factual, thorough, scrupulous, referential — without claiming to be describing anything.<sup>56</sup>

Authors who write in this style would be obliged to find innovative ways of negotiating multi-subjective, power-laden, and disconnected realities. Polyvocality, the interspersion of the author's voice with other voices, has become an indispensable characteristic of the new textual form in which no one voice should gain authorial control. Those voices may be from the present or the past. Social historians find the thoughts and experiences of late social actors and narrators in many primary sources such as letters, diaries, court archives, newspapers, business records, and government documents.

The argument will be made that an author simply cannot give voice to every discordant discourse detected in a culture. To do so would be unwieldy, with no coherent effect. It would also treat all discourses as equivalent, thus producing a net repressive effect. This criticism of relativity, of an "anything goes" philosophy, which is frequently levelled at poststructuralist theorists, is decidedly refused by both Derrida and Foucault. Derrida has distanced himself from authors who have interpreted his notion of the free play

<sup>55</sup> Keesing, "Anthropology as Interpretive Quest", p. 167.

<sup>56</sup> Clifford, "Notes on (Field)notes", p. 68.

of signifiers as wholly unconstrained, and Foucault's genealogical and archaeological projects are implicitly grounded in truth-claims.<sup>57</sup> Thus, while polyvocality adds another emancipatory dimension to that of the theory and content of a social history, it is also crafted in the context of truth-claims the author wishes to make. Contested evocations are not incompatible with truth-claims, understanding, or communication. They are simply less about Truth.

Because most scholars have difficulty rendering this concept of multi-subjective realities into textual form, it may be useful to cite at some length an acclaimed, if nascent, example of bivocality. In the introduction to her book *Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman*, Marjorie Shostak provides a thorough discussion of strategic choices both when she collected her ethnographic data on the !Kung and when she used this data to construct an ethnography. Her improvisations culminate when she constructs a two-voiced account that juxtaposes her discourse about specific aspects of !Kung life with Nisa's personal narrative about the same topics.<sup>58</sup> Nisa's voice and experience provide a discourse on Shostak's discourse, supportive of the ethnographer's interpretations at one moment, discordant at another. The dialogue between them resists the possibility of a single narrative interpretation of or truth about !Kung life. Indeed, Shostak reminds readers that "Nisa's narrative is just one view of !Kung life. Her history does not represent the whole range of experience available to women in her culture; the life stories of other women are often quite different."<sup>59</sup> Including more of these voices may have made this claim more salient to readers.

The following excerpt is taken from the second chapter on family life. As in other chapters, Shostak's interpretation of the topic — based on an analysis of her field notes about the community at large which includes many other !Kung voices — is followed by Nisa's personal narrative. First are two paragraphs of Shostak's discourse:

The anger and resentment occasioned by the birth of a sibling may be reflected in tensions between adjacent siblings for months or even years. One young girl expressed feelings from her early childhood: "After my sister was born, I remember looking at her and thinking, 'That's not my sister, that's someone else's sister.' I wanted to hit her because everyone kept telling me she *was* my sister. But I just *knew* she wasn't. One day, when she was about a week

57 Ali Rattansi, " 'Western' Racisms, Ethnicities and Identities in a 'Postmodern' Frame", in A. Rattansi and S. Westwood, eds., *Racism, Modernity, Identity on the Western Front* (Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 1994).

58 Shostak, *Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman*. Nisa is a !Kung woman, approximately 50 years old, who became Shostak's primary life historian. Shostak conducted 21 interviews (8% of all the interviews she undertook) with Nisa. These conversations provided Shostak with the richest insights into !Kung life.

59 Shostak, *Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman*, p. 43.

old, I did hit her. My father punished me, so I didn't do it again. That was bad, of course. But I had no sense at the time."

!Kung children are discouraged from fighting, but anger is recognised as something they ultimately have to learn to handle themselves; children of comparable strength often resolve their own fights before parents become involved. Dealing with anger is difficult for adults as well as for children. Daily tensions often spark conflicts that result in bitter displays of antagonism. By-standers attempt to quell the truly serious eruptions, but it is not always easy: when arguments arise, everyone is apt to become involved. Physical fights sometimes ensue. Such outbursts are usually followed by personal regret and by attempts to make up for any harm done. Fortunately, most conflicts are resolved before they reach this point, through hours of talk; or less commonly, by splitting up of the group, either temporarily or permanently.<sup>60</sup>

A few paragraphs of Nisa's account follow:

We lived and lived, and as I kept growing, I started to carry my little brother around on my shoulders. My heart was happy then; I had grown to love him and carried him everywhere. I'd play with him for a while and whenever he would start to cry, I'd take him to Mother so he could nurse. Then I'd take him back with me and we'd play together again.

That was when Kumsa was little. But once he was older and started to talk and then to run around, that's when we were mean to each other and hit and fought all the time. Because that's how children play. One child does mean things and the other children do mean things back. If your father goes out hunting one day, you think, "Won't Daddy bring home meat? Then I can eat it, but I can also *stinge* it!" When your father does come home with meat, you say, "My daddy brought back meat and I won't let you have *any* of it!" The other children say, "How come we play together yet you always treat us so badly?"

When Kumsa was bigger, we were like that all the time. Sometimes we'd hit each other. Other times, I'd grab him and bite him and said, "Oooo ... what is this thing that has such a horrible face and no brains and is so mean? How come it is so mean to me when I'm not doing anything to it?" Then he'd say, "I'm going to *hit* you! What's protecting you that I shouldn't?" And I'd say, "You're just a baby! I, *I* am the one who's going to hit *you*! Why are you so miserable to me?" I'd insult him and he'd insult me and I'd insult him back. We'd just stay together and play like that.<sup>61</sup>

Shostak's use of bivocality is one textual representational strategy and a style of cultural description that begins to respond to the crisis of representation. As such, it has historiographic potential. The liberating effects of polyvocality underscore my conviction that, when we fail to consider how

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

<sup>61</sup> Nisa, cited in *ibid.*, p. 69.

different representational strategies used to construct social histories both enable and constrain, our failure may dispel some of the emancipatory effects, whether theoretical, methodological, or empirical, that the text may produce. Stylistic form and textual strategy are equally important elements of emancipatory social histories.

### Conclusion

Clifford Geertz's concept of thick description has influenced academic disciplines — including social history — that are concerned with the study, definition, and representation of culture. However, as scholars have become aware that cultural representations are politically embodied (the crisis of representation), ethnography as thick description has come under intense scrutiny. Postmodern ethnographers are interested in understanding how this form perpetuates certain relations of power and domination. As academics across disciplines grapple with these issues, a new textual ethnography has been forged, one that seeks a radical transformation of predominant insights regarding the constitution, definition, and conceptualization of culture. As Said suggests:

If we no longer think of the relationship between cultures and their adherents as perfectly contiguous, totally synchronous, wholly correspondent, and if we think of cultures as permeable and, on the whole, defensive boundaries between polities, a more promising situation appears. Thus to see Others not as ontologically given but as historically constituted would be to erode the exclusivist biases we so often ascribe to cultures, our own not least. Cultures may then be represented as zones of control or of abandonment, or recollection and of forgetting, of force or of dependence, of exclusiveness or of sharing, all taking place in the global history that is our element. Exile, immigration, and the crossing of boundaries are experiences that can therefore provide us with new narrative forms ... with *other* ways of telling.<sup>62</sup>

Postmodern ethnographers are examples of these new narrative forms, new ways of telling, which call into question both the practice and politics of thick description.

I suspect that Parr has incorporated the critique of thick description and cultural representation, as well as postmodern ethnographic insights, into her more recent work. In her article "Gender History and Historical Practice", she argues against social histories as "definitive" pieces of work and for a "recognition of temporariness and impermanence" in "historical stories".<sup>63</sup> However, her current preoccupation with highlighting the "partialness of our understanding of the past the artifices through which certain beliefs and

<sup>62</sup> Said, "Representing the Colonised", p. 225.

<sup>63</sup> Joy Parr, "Gender Histories and Historical Practice", *Canadian Historical Review*, vol. 76, no. 3 (1995), p. 355.



practices have been selected and elevated as absolutes and universals”<sup>64</sup> has yet to affect the actual textual construction of social histories more generally, including her own. Perhaps a serious consideration of Clifford’s contention that cultural analyses may be more emancipatory when conceived of as acts of writing based on field notes rather than actual descriptions and interpretations based on field methods<sup>65</sup> would incite “the partialness of our understanding of the past”<sup>66</sup> in textual form.

Parr and Iacovetta, without explicitly acknowledging their debts to interpretive anthropology, follow in its troublesome textual tradition of a thick description that relies on bracketing difference and using an omnipresent authorial voice. Although they show increasing sensitivity to a postmodern sensibility, the authorial voice, stylistic form, and textual construction of their social histories perpetuate oppressive power relations despite the emancipatory empirical, methodological, and theoretical insights they contain. As many postmodern ethnographers would argue, the manner in which social historians present material is a historiographic consideration equally important to the choice of theoretical frameworks and empirical strategies.

64 *Ibid.*, p. 356.

65 Clifford, “Notes on (Field)notes”.

66 Parr, “Gender History and Historical Practice”, p. 356.