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returns

Becoming Indigenous in the Twenty-First Century

JAMES CLIFFORD

RETURNS

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JAMES CLIFFORD

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RETURNS



PROLOGUE

Returns is the third volume in a series beginning in 1988 with *The Predicament of Culture* and followed in 1997 by *Routes*. Like the others, it collects work written over roughly a decade. Ideas begun in one book are reworked in the others. All the important questions remain open. *Returns* is thus not a conclusion, the completion of a trilogy. It belongs to a continuing series of reflections, responses to changing times. In retrospect, how can these times be understood? What larger historical developments, shifting pressures and limits, have shaped this course of thinking and writing?

Situating one's own work historically, with limited hindsight, is a risky exercise. One is sure to be proven wrong, or at least out of date. Rereading my words in *The Predicament of Culture*, I feel most acutely their distance. They belong to another world. There is no "globalization" in the book's index, no "Internet," no "postcolonial." Searching for a historical narrative to make sense of what has changed, I now recognize a profound shift of power relations and discursive locations. Call this change, for short, the decentering of the West. I hasten to add that "decentering" doesn't mean the abolition, disappearance, or transcendence of that still potent zone of power. But a change, uneven and incomplete, has been going on. The ground has moved.

A conversation from the early 1970s comes to mind. I was a doctoral student conducting research in the Malinowski papers at the London School of Economics. One afternoon outside the library I found myself discussing the history of anthropology with Raymond Firth, the great anthropologist of Tikopia. Firth had been a student and colleague of Malinowski. He wondered about attempts to link cross-cultural research with colonial power, in particular the important book edited by Talal Asad, *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter*. Without minimizing

the issue, Firth thought the relations between anthropology and empire were more complex than some of the critics were suggesting. He shook his head in a mixture of pretended and real confusion. What happened? Not so long ago we were radicals. We thought of ourselves as critical intellectuals, advocates for the value of indigenous cultures, defenders of our people. Now, all of a sudden, we're handmaidens of empire!

That is what it is like to feel "historical." The marking of colonialism as a period, a span of time with a possible ending, came suddenly to Euro-American liberal scholars. Who would have predicted in the early 1950s that within a decade most of the colonies ruled by France and Britain would be formally independent? Feeling historical can be like a rug pulled out: a gestalt change, perhaps, or a sense of sudden relocation, of exposure to some previously hidden gaze. For Euro-American anthropology, the experience of being identified as a "Western" science, a purveyor of partial truths, has been alienating, a difficult but ultimately enriching process. The same kind of challenge and learning experience would engage many scholars of my generation with respect to gender, race, and sexuality. For of course more than "the West" has been decentered during the past fifty years.

In retrospect, I locate my work within a postwar narrative of political and cultural shifts. Like Firth, I have come to feel historical.



Born in 1945, I grew up in New York City and Vermont. This was the peace of the victors: the Cold War standoff and a sustained, American-led, economic expansion. My fundamental sense of reality—what actually existed and was possible—would be formed in circumstances of unprecedented material prosperity and security. Of course my generation experienced recurring fears of nuclear annihilation. But since disarmament was not around the corner, we learned, on a daily basis, to live with "the balance of terror." In other respects the world seemed stable and expansive, at least for white, middle-class North Americans. We would never lack resources. Wars were fought elsewhere. The lines of geopolitical antagonism were clearly drawn and, most of the time, manageable.

New York City during the 1950s felt like the center of the world. North American power and influence was concentrated in downtown Manhattan. A subway ride took you to Wall Street, the United Nations, the Museum of Modern Art, or avant-garde Greenwich Village. The decolonizing movements of the postwar period arrived belatedly in the

form of civil rights, the Vietnam debacle, and a growing receptiveness to cultural alternatives. My critical thinking was nurtured by radical art and the politics of diversity. Its sources were Dada and surrealism, cross-cultural anthropology, music, and popular culture. New historical actors—women, excluded racial and social groups—were making claims for justice and recognition.

Like many of my generation, I saw academic work as inseparable from these wider challenges to societal norms and cultural authority. The moment brought a new openness in intellectual, political, and cultural life. Established canons and institutional structures were challenged. The ferment also produced exclusivist identity politics, hedonistic subcultures, and forms of managed multiculturalism. The language of diversity could mask persistent inequalities. Most academic writing, including my own, never questioned the liberal privilege of “making space” for marginal perspectives. One should not overestimate the changes associated with “the sixties.” Many apparent accomplishments—antipoverty initiatives, affirmative action, women’s rights—are now embattled or in retreat. Yet something important happened. Things changed, unevenly, incompletely, but decisively. To mention only American universities: the blithely Eurocentric, male-dominated English department of the 1950s now seems like a bad dream.

When I was thirty-three, I moved from the North Atlantic to the edge of the Pacific, from one global ocean and world center to another. For a time, I lived as a New Yorker in diaspora, out on a periphery, the “West Coast.” But little by little the presence of Asia, the long history of north/south movements in the Americas, and influences from culturally rich Island Pacific worlds made themselves felt. In a decentered, dynamic world of contacts, the whole idea of the West, as a kind of historical headquarters, stopped making sense.

In Northern California it soon became clear that the decentering I had begun to feel was not just an outcome of postwar decolonizing energies and the contestations of the global sixties. These forces had made, and were still making, a difference. But the shift was also the work of newly flexible and mobile forms of capitalism. I was caught up in the double history of two unfinished, postwar forces working in tension and synergy: decolonization and globalization.

Santa Cruz, California, my home after 1978, epitomized this doubleness. A university town and enclave of countercultural, sixties visionaries, the town was also a bedroom community for the new high-tech

world of Silicon Valley. This was the “Pacific Rim” of massive capital flows, Asian Tigers, and labor migrations. I also lived on a *frontera*, a place in the uncontrolled, expanding borderland linking Latin America with the United States and Canada. In the northern half of Santa Cruz County: a university and town government that strongly identified with multicultural, feminist, environmentalist, anti-imperial agendas. In the southern part of the county: a changing population of Mexican/Latino workers and the growing power of agribusiness. I began to think of the present historical moment as a contradictory, inescapably ambivalent, conjuncture: simultaneously post- and neocolonial.

Driving along the cliff tops to San Francisco I could contemplate a line from Charles Olson: “Where we run out of continent.” We? California was coming to feel less like the “West Coast” of a United States of America and more like a crossing of multiple histories. The essays in *Routes* would reflect this complex sense of location and mobility. And the final essay, “Fort Ross Meditation,” would point me north to Alaska, a different *frontera*. Fort Ross, now reconstructed just up the coast from San Francisco, was an early nineteenth-century outpost of the Russian fur-trading empire. Among the several populations gathered there, the most numerous were maritime Alaska Natives (Alutiiq or Sugpiaq as they now call themselves), a coerced labor force of sea otter hunters. In my subsequent research, Part Three of *Returns*, I followed the tracks of these mobile Natives to Kodiak Island, where today their descendants are renewing a damaged heritage. The Fort Ross contact zone also led me to a deeper interest in native California, and especially to the changing story of Ishi, the state’s most famous Indian. Today, the “last wild Indian” is making a comeback in contexts unimaginable a century ago. The many versions of Ishi’s story are explored in *Returns*, Part Two: a meditation on terror and healing, repatriation and renewal.

Teaching at the University of California, Santa Cruz, also opened contacts with South Asia and the Island Pacific through the graduate students who studied in UCSC’s interdisciplinary History of Consciousness program. Academic voyagers, they identified themselves as “postcolonial” and/or “indigenous.” Some would remain to teach in the United States; others went home. These younger scholars’ clear sense of working within, while looking beyond, a Euro-American world of ideas and institutions intensified my own sense of being at the edge or the end of something. I realized I had a part to play in the history they were constructing.

The essays in *Returns*, like their predecessors, are rooted in the 1980s

and 1990s. As the sixties waned and a globalizing neoliberalism took hold, visions of revolution were replaced by cultural and intellectual tactics of transgression and critique. By the 1980s, frontal resistance to a mobile hegemony seemed useless. We were in a Gramscian “war of position,” a series of small resistances and subversions. What could not be defeated might at least be undermined, transgressed, opened up. For many intellectuals working inside Euro-American centers of power this meant supporting “diversity” in both epistemological and sociocultural registers. Space could be cleared for discrepant senses of the real; positions could be staked out for future struggles; dominant forms of authority and common sense could be criticized and theoretically disassembled. Much of my writing in *The Predicament of Culture*, with its rejection of monological authority and its commitment to multiplicity and experimentation, made sense in this conjuncture. *Routes*, too, belongs in this world of critique, though its receptivity to emergent forms, both diasporic and indigenous, hints at something more. The current book, *Returns*, though still marked by the 1990s, begins to register a new historical conjuncture.



Developments after 2000 are less susceptible to narration than the post-sixties decades. A few things seem probable: the United States, newly vulnerable, is no longer an uncontested global leader. Its military surge following 9/11 proved unsustainable—a spasmodic reaction to secular, irreversible changes. There will doubtless be further adventures, but American global hegemony is no longer a credible project. It is countered by new centers of economic power, by Islam as only the most visible among non-Western globalizing ideologies, by forms of authoritarian capitalism in Asia. The signs of systemic crisis and transition are everywhere: financial instability and uncontrollable markets, rising inequality and scarcity, deepening ecological limits and competition for resources, the internal fragmentation and fiscal emergency of many nation-states. Crisis without resolution, transition without destination. In the 1980s Margaret Thatcher could famously declare: “TINA: There Is No Alternative.” Today, a statement like this makes no sense: everyone knows there are alternatives, for better and for worse.

From my perch in the new millennium, I understand the last half-century as the interaction of two linked historical energies: decolonization and globalization. Neither process is linear or guaranteed. Neither can subsume the other. Both are contradictory and open ended. And

both have worked to decenter the West, to “provincialize Europe,” in Dipesh Chakrabarty’s words. This is an unfinished but irreversible project.

“Globalization” is not, or not simply, “the capitalist world system.” It is of course capitalist, and more. Globalization is a name for the evolving world of connections we know, but can’t adequately represent. It is a sign of excess. This is obviously not the nineties version: “the end of history,” “the flat earth.” Nor is this the familiar enemy: Jose Bové tilting against McDonald’s, the “Battle of Seattle.” Globalization is the multidirectional, unrepresentable sum of material and cultural relationships linking places and people, distant and nearby. It is not just a continuation of empire, dominion by other, more flexible, means, as critics on the Left tend to argue. You can’t say imperialism from below, but you can say globalization from below, or from the edge. “Globalization” is a placeholder, *in medias res*. The essays in *Returns* begin to explore this articulated, polycentric totality. Multiple Zeitgeists. A bush, or tangle, of histories.

Similarly, “decolonization” is an unfinished, excessive historical process. More than the national liberations of the 1950s and 1960s that were initially successful and then co-opted, decolonization names a recurring agency, a blocked, diverted, continually reinvented historical force. The energies once bundled in phrases like the “Third World” or “national liberation” are still with us. They reemerge in unexpected places and forms: “indigeneity” (all those people once destined to disappear . . .), the “Arab Spring” (whatever it turns out to be . . .), and even that universal adversary, the “terrorist.”

There is certainly something hopeful in the surprises that an open-ended history can be counted on to deliver. Some of us, at least, can take heart from the failures of the dominant systems we resisted (and came, in the process, to depend on). The inability of neoliberal ideology to subsume alternatives, to round up and account for everyone, makes it easier to imagine new identities, social struggles, and kinds of conviviality. But this exciting sense of historical possibility is inseparable, at least for me, from another feeling, something I didn’t experience twenty-five years ago: fear, the visceral awareness of a given world suddenly gone. Feeling historical: the ground shifting.

Suddenly there are serious questions about our grandchildren’s future. And this sense of insecurity, no doubt related to cyclical processes of political-economic decline, is intensified by long-term ecological threats

that can no longer be managed or exported. Historicity at a different scale: that of a species among other species, the past and future of a whole planet and its ability to sustain life. What happens when population growth reaches its limits, when the supplies run out, when the resource wars get really desperate? These instabilities are deep and world changing. Of course this feeling of exposure is something like what most people in the world have always known.

The certainty of having lived in a bubble, a “First World” security that is no more. Goodbye to all that. And now?



Returns follows just one emergent strand: the indigenous histories of survival, struggle, and renewal that became widely visible during the 1980s and 1990s. Tribal, aboriginal, or First Nations societies had long been destined to disappear in the progressive violence of Western civilization and economic development. Most well-informed people assumed that genocide (tragic) and acculturation (inevitable) would do history's work. But by the end of the twentieth century it became clear that something different was going on. Many native people were indeed killed; languages were lost, societies disrupted. But many have held on, adapting and recombining the remnants of an interrupted way of life. They reach back selectively to deeply rooted, adaptive traditions: creating new pathways in a complex postmodernity. Cultural endurance is a process of becoming.

In *Returns* I explore this becoming, as it works its way through pragmatic engagements with globalizing powers, with diverse capitalisms, and with particular national hegemonies. To account for indigenous life in these powerful force fields I grapple with issues of political-economic determination. And I revisit questions about cultural wholeness and historical continuity that were raised in the concluding chapter of *The Predicament of Culture*, “Identity in Mashpee.” Twenty-five years later, the processes of indigenous persistence and revival suggested by these questions are more than just occasions for loosening Western categories. Now, at a time of systemic crisis and uncertain transition, I see them as real, alternative paths forward.

In *Returns* I argue for an ethnographic and historical realism—recognizing that ideas of history and the real are currently contested and also inventively translated in power-charged sites from land-claims courtrooms to museums and universities. All such conjunctures are

contingent and composed of discrepant strands. Thus an adequate realism must juxtapose—connect and keep apart—consequential, partial stories. I work with three narratives, active in the last half-century: decolonization, globalization, and indigenous becoming. They represent distinct historical energies, scales of action, and politics of the possible. They cannot be reduced to a single determining structure or history. Nor can they be held apart for long. The three histories construct, reinforce, and trouble each other. “Big-enough” histories like these need to be held in dialectical tension, simultaneous but not synchronous. *Returns* thus offers a lumpy verisimilitude in which political, economic, social, and cultural forces intersect but do not form a whole. If the book is unable to wrap things up, to master the changing times, this failure, consciously engaged, underlies its claim to realism.



Returns is organized in three loosely connected sections.

Part One is general and theoretical in scope. It explores various ways of understanding the indigenous today, and it argues that ideas of historical destiny and developing time need to be revised to account for these cultural renewals and social movements. Tools for analyzing historical transformation and political agency are introduced: articulation, performance, and translation. Theories of cultural materialism, hegemony, and diaspora drawn from cultural studies in the tradition of Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, and Paul Gilroy are linked with ethnographic-historical approaches from cultural anthropology. The three essays gathered in Part One begin to imagine a displaced, “post-Western” perspective, a place of translations through which to understand indigenous agency. Subsequent discussions develop these ideas in particular contemporary contexts.

Part Two tracks an exemplary story of indigenous disappearance that has become one of renewal. “Ishi” was famous in 1911 when he turned up in a settler-California town and was understood to be “the last wild Indian in America.” He was famous again after 1960, when his biography, by Theodora Kroeber, became a best seller. And around 2000, Ishi could again be found in the newspapers as California Indians finally buried his physical remains and in the process reopened a legacy of settler-colonial violence. I followed the repatriation process with interest, attending public gatherings and talking with participants. Once a symbol for the disappearance of the state’s original people, Ishi has come to rep-

resent their survival. His experience, enigmatic and productive, in life and in death, is meaningful to many people in many different ways. Ishi's story addresses the continuing legacy of colonial violence, the history of anthropology, the efficacy of healing, the prospects for postcolonial reconciliation, and much else.

Part Three, after a comparative glance at the Island Pacific, focuses on central Alaska, specifically the Kodiak archipelago. My discussion of Alutiiq/Sugpiaq cultural renewal is based on research over the last decade that could be described as academic visiting (or perhaps journalism with theoretical characteristics). The results are gathered in two linked essays. The first discusses collaborative heritage work, especially a major exhibition and multiply authored book of 2001, *Looking Both Ways*. The second centers on the Alutiiq Museum and Archaeological Repository, a Native-administered cultural center in Kodiak. It describes the return of nineteenth-century masks, loaned from their present home in France, and the new meanings these ancestral artifacts can evoke in a changing world. The masks' translated "second life" unfolds in tangled contexts of local history, transnational indigeneity, and state policies of corporate multiculturalism.

If Parts One and Three of *Returns* are conceived under the sign of realism, Part Two unfolds in a different analytic and imaginative way. It traces the collapse of a settler-colonial history but does not seek to replace it with a new, more adequate narrative. Instead it adopts an ironic, "meta" perspective that leaves space for plural, contradictory, and utopian outcomes. The stories surrounding the name "Ishi" proliferate, opening new possibilities. Other kinds of progress become imaginable: utopias that may be already here, ways forward that are not about progressing, but rather involve turning and returning. The challenge is to imagine different directions and movements in history, developments taking place together and apart. Here, *Returns* runs out of language.

The book's architecture requires some explanation. Like its two predecessors it is a collage of essays, written at different times and in distinct styles, or voices. I have not smoothed over the bumpy transitions. Rhetorical diversity keeps visible the contexts and audiences that have shaped the book's research and thinking. It suggests a process, not a final product. Familiar genres—the monograph, the essay collection—are currently in flux. In the years since *The Predicament of Culture* appeared a quarter-century ago, reading practices have changed. Fewer people consume books continuously, starting at the beginning and proceeding to the

end. They copy, scan, and download parts. *Predicament* and *Routes*, after a period of existence as “books,” have enjoyed a second life in the form of photocopies and PDF files. Some of this “publication” has occurred within the rules of copyright, some not. Knowledge transmitted this way cannot, nor should it, be legally contained. In any event, it has become all too clear that the academic book, as a physical object, does not travel very well. Disassembled and modular, the text gets around.

Returns is constructed with the new forms of distribution in mind. While it is more than the sum of its parts, the three sections are separable. Each is an extended essay that can be read independently and in any order. For lack of a better name, I have thought of them as academic “novellas”—intermediate forms of writing that can sustain complexity and development without sacrificing readability. I imagine that three short books can be read with more pleasure, at different times and in different moods, than a single long one. Moreover, within the three parts of *Returns* each chapter is a stand-alone essay.


A book organized in this way will contain a certain amount of redundancy. Important contexts need to be established more than once, and essential ideas recur. *Returns* does not proceed in a straight line: its “argument” loops and starts over. I have tried, however, to keep blatant repetitions to a minimum, and each chapter introduces a new context for exploring the work’s central concerns. It should also be noted that some inconsistencies of usage remain. For example, in Alaska contexts I adopt the local convention of capitalizing Native and Elder, but not elsewhere.

A final word on changing names. Indigenous societies everywhere are in the process of removing colonial names and reviving, sometimes inventing, old/new ones. This is an essential part of the decolonizing process. Kwakwak’awakw replaces Kwakiutl; Tohono O’odham, Papago; Inuit, Eskimo; Aotearoa, New Zealand. In *Returns* I respect the changed names and use them. There are times, however, when it is appropriate to include both the colonial and postcolonial versions. This may reflect unsettled local usage, or a desire to avoid anachronism in historical contexts, or the need to be clear for uninitiated readers.

For my central subject, there is no universally satisfactory name: indigenous, native, aboriginal, tribal, Indian, Native American, First Nation (to mention only words in English). Depending on where one is and who is paying attention, one risks giving offense, or sounding tone deaf.

Part I



The image is a very faint, low-contrast photograph that occupies the upper two-thirds of the page. It appears to show a person, likely Jean-Marie Tjibaou, standing in a natural, possibly mountainous or valley-like landscape. The details are too light to discern clearly, but the overall impression is of a person in an ancestral habitat.

Jean-Marie Tjibaou, Kanak independence leader, in the Hienghène Valley, New Caledonia, 1978. Behind him is an ancestral habitat to which his tribe has returned after many years of colonial dispossession. (See Chapter 2.) (Photo by James Clifford.)



AMONG HISTORIES

Indian agency has often been read as a demand to return to a utopian past that never was. Another emendation would suggest that we know very well such a return is impossible: instead the conversation is about a different kind of today, where we are present in the world like anyone else. We always have been trying to be part of the world.

—Paul Chaat Smith, *Everything You Know about Indians Is Wrong*

Indigenous people have emerged from history's blind spot. No longer pathetic victims or noble messengers from lost worlds, they are visible actors in local, national, and global arenas. On every continent, survivors of colonial invasions and forced assimilation renew their cultural heritage and reconnect with lost lands. They struggle within dominant regimes that continue to belittle and misunderstand them, their very survival a form of resistance.

To take seriously the current resurgence of native, tribal, or aboriginal societies we need to avoid both romantic celebration and knowing critique. An attitude of critical openness is required, a way of engaging with complex historical transformations and intersecting paths in the contemporary world. I call this attitude realism. Its sources, primarily historical and ethnographic, will emerge in this and subsequent chapters. Realism is never a simple description. It is a narrative process assembling "big-enough histories"—big enough to matter but not too big. Indigeneity today is such a story. It unfolds, in Stuart Hall's words, on "the contradictory, stony ground of the present conjuncture" (1989: 151).



Today the word "indigenous" describes a work in progress. Derived from old Latin, it means "born or produced from within," with primary definitions suggesting nativeness; originating or growing in a country;