Moments of Freedom: Anthropology and Popular Culture

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Popular Culture in Anthropology

Culture versus Popular Culture

Some time ago Zygmunt Bauman, one of sharpest critics of the anthropological concept of culture, formulated an insight that can be the starting point for thought about popular culture. In his book Culture as Praxis he argued that there is little use trying to settle the question of what culture means; certainly it is useless to search for an unassailable definition. All talk about culture is talk, rhetoric, an argument designed to convince, a discourse claiming to present a certain kind of knowledge. As he put it, "The concept of culture, whatever its specific elaborations, belongs with the family of terms standing for human praxis" (Bauman 1973, 117). I read this to mean that what culture stands for, as well as our ways of making it stand for something, is human praxis. Though it makes sense to distinguish theory from practice, that distinction itself is made as part of a praxis of, say, scientific inquiry. Anthropological (or for that matter any kind of) culture theory is a kind of praxis.

Much like culture without a qualifier, popular culture signals discursive strategies and research practices that produce a certain kind of knowledge. When we add the qualifier "popular" to culture, we do so because we believe it allows us to conceptualize certain kinds of human praxis that the concept of culture without the qualifier either ignores or makes disappear. Although the two concepts do not differ in that they constitute practices, culture tout court is usually talked about as if it existed as an entity, as if it was there to be studied; discourse on popular culture tends to be about movements
or processes rather than entities. Moreover, talk about popular culture in anthropology (but also in other fields, especially in history) has been argumentative, sometimes militant. As a negation or antonym of culture, popular culture contests integrative and normative conceptions (catchwords: system, beliefs, and values) that came to characterize modern structural-functional theories of culture that all but obliterated concern with freedom and power. As an affirmation, popular culture theory asserts the existence of spaces of freedom and creativity in situations of oppression and supposedly passive mass consumption.

In sum, determining what popular culture means is not a matter of semantics. Pragmatics and rhetoric, in fact attention to political praxis, are required if we want to appreciate why and how the concept is being deployed in current research and writing (more on this in the last section of this chapter). Emphasis on the practical also implies that uses of popular culture are seen as embedded in historical conditions and that concept and term may take on different meanings depending on such contexts. It makes a difference whether popular culture in Europe and North America is opposed in predominantly aesthetic terms to high or elite culture; whether it becomes the political battle cry of “conscientization” and liberation in Latin America; whether it is defined as the correct culture as happened, at least during a certain period, in “Popular” China; or whether it is being used, almost exclusively by academic intellectuals, in an effort to further our understanding of contemporary African culture by progressing from fixations on tribal traditions perishing under the onslaught of Westernization to appreciating the vital, often exuberant expressions modern Africans give to their experiences. It is only a slight exaggeration to state that contemporary African music, theater, painting, and sculpture, but also much of religion and politics, would not have become objects of research in anthropology had it not been for popular culture or some such notion. Of course those who live the contemporary African life may have no need for the concept of popular culture. “What you are talking about is our culture,” an African participant recently told the audience at a symposium on popular culture in Africa.

Before moving on, let us take conceptual stock. (Popular) culture is not an entity; the term stands for certain discursive strategies. Popular culture signals a discourse that raises issues of power, if only because it tends to contest what is being affirmed about culture. Although the approach sketched here denies ontological status to culture, this does not mean that culture and popular culture are merely analytical categories or heuristic devices. They are real enough as practices of inquiry and writing, addressed to real practices of living and embroiled in political relations and interests. This is why concepts such as (popular) culture are anything but a matter of definition. Consequently, when we want to defend the notion of popular culture, we should concentrate on what it makes appear and become known, rather than agonize about the adjective “popular.”

From Culture to Popular Culture

But I am getting ahead of my story. Popular culture is by now accepted in anthropology as a distinctive concept and field of inquiry. It is for future historians of the discipline to show us how this happened. In the meantime, those of us who took the road from culture to popular culture can tell our stories.

In the sixties, when I prepared myself at an American university for dissertation research in Africa, the concept of culture was more in vogue than ever. It was the centerpiece of a “unified theory of action” (as the project was called) designed to bring together “behavioral sciences” such as anthropology, sociology, psychology, and political science. Thought about culture, as it was propagated then, was said to have liberated itself from premodern connotations of a singular, hierarchical, elitist Bildung or la civilisation. Culture was universal, yet plural. That was progress, and we were conscious of it.

What did not bother us much was that culture had all but lost its
militant connotations. Historically, contestation started with a defiant use of culture in the plural, challenging singular, exclusive, or hierarchical notions developed when, from Enlightenment and romantic beginnings, evolutionism emerged as one of the first paradigms of the discipline. Defiance was also the spirit that reigned when Franz Boas and his disciples set out to formulate a theory of culture designed to compete with racist doctrines in explaining how human behavior was determined.

But culture, though conceived in a defiant, militant spirit, came out positive; it was made up of values and beliefs that oriented, directed, and organized action in systems it provided with their own logic. Culture gave purpose to the social system and ensured its equilibrium. Behavior that did not fit this ideal was abnormal, deviant, dysfunctional, and therefore—though I don’t remember anyone’s actually saying this—acultural or anticultural. Such was the enthusiasm for a structuralist-functionalist theory of culture that few suspected it of being a law-and-order concept that was not at all that different from what our Enlightenment predecessors had in mind when they spoke of civilized societies as sociétés politiques.

Equipped with such a powerful theory of culture, I set out to study the Jamaa, a religious movement in the Shaba region of Zaire. Like others of my generation, I approached my task critically. I was prepared to understand as creative and innovative a phenomenon that had previously been perceived and described as, at worst, curious, disturbing, misguided, and mixed up and as at best a “syncretist” result of acculturation and social change. Convinced that ideas rather than dire needs or uncontrolled drives were at the center of the Jamaa movement I had selected for study, I concentrated on doctrine and its transmission through teaching and initiation. Language became central in my investigations; the language in which the ideas were expressed, the distinctive vocabulary and rhetoric that characterized the doctrine, and the practices of speaking and communicating that gave me access to it all. One of the attractions of such an approach was that, in a late colonial, early postcolonial context, it made anthropological research possible in a thoroughly modern urban-industrial world. I could do without a society, a tribe, or even a village; I had a movement.

I am not about to argue that all this reasoning—inspired as it was by a Weberian-Parsonian concept of culture—was misguided and misleading. In fact I am still rather proud of the work I did with the Jamaa, and I know that I laid the foundation for what I have been doing since. It took many years and other projects in the same area before I realized that the productivity and elegance of the culture theory I started out with had a price. To express this in an image that is not all that exaggerated, the light this approach concentrated on the religious movement that was the object of study left in the dark the rest of the world of which it was a part. I knew how to converse about intricacies of doctrine but was utterly incapable of discussing the latest soccer match. I spent countless hours in the homes of followers (mostly mine workers with their families) where we gathered to listen to Jamaa teaching, but I paid little attention to the furniture, the pictures on the walls, or the clothes people were wearing. Day or night, in some corner of the miners’ company town where I lived, people were playing records of Zairian music or drumming and dancing at a wake, wedding, or puberty rite. For me all this was little more than background noise, in contrast to the sounds of Jamaa mafundisha and hymns. What I took away from field research in the mid-sixties was the ethnography of a movement, presented as something not quite unique but highly distinctive and seemingly self-contained. I also knew the founder was the author of a book on Bantu philosophy that had an impact throughout Africa and beyond and that certain Jamaa tenets, such as the crucial rite of “encounter,” were somehow part of an international (today we would say global) Christian lay movement inspired by social psychology. But all this was put aside, at least for the time being. I had yet to understand that the global is in the local.

Although it came slowly, I still experienced it as a revelation when, during another stay in Shaba from 1972 to 1974 and in the
years that followed, I understood that the very language the Jamaa movement spoke, a variety of Swahili, was not just there, the way languages usually seem to be because we don’t catch them at their birth. Shaba Swahili had been created not long before by people from many different corners of Zaire and neighboring countries who suddenly found themselves wage earners in towns. Much of the distinctive style of speaking and conversing I had discovered in the Jamaa turned out to be characteristic of public speech in the mining towns of Shaba. As a religious movement, the Jamaa was connected to similar grassroots appropriations and transformations of Christianity, and the members of the Jamaa shared with millions of other Zaírians their petit bourgeois attitudes toward their living rooms, their ideas of a picture they would like to have on the wall or of a tune they would like to listen and dance to. In fact religion was just one domain and one kind of discourse that, together with music, painting, and theater, made up a vast complex of thought, representations, and performances. And that was popular culture.

I must note, however, that this discovery was anything but the predictable or actual result of the research project that had brought me back to Shaba. In my grant application and the extensive final report, I never invoked the concept of popular culture. The theoretical frame I had formulated for this project was inspired by sociolinguistics and the ethnography of speaking. Its focus was on language and work in industrial and artisanal contexts. Documentation concentrated on lexical-semantic classification, on speech events and communicative exchanges, as well as on reflections and life histories, all of them recorded at work or in workers’ homes. By that time I had moved away from the kind of systemic, symbol- and meaning-centered notion of culture described earlier. Still, even in its communication-centered and pragmatic form, what I called culture without a qualifier continued to guide my research. I thought of other pursuits, such as my contacts with popular theater and painting, as fascinating yet rather incidental extensions of my sociolinguistic project. Almost reluctantly, I began to use the term “work-

ers’ culture” to express the growing insight that all of this, from the semantics of technical terms in Swahili to the intriguing paintings of mermaids I noticed on the walls of workers’ living rooms, was somehow connected. “Urban culture” would have been an alternative designation; urban anthropology was by then an established subdiscipline. For several reasons, only some of which I can put into words, I never thought my work should be classified as urban anthropology. True, large modern towns were the sites where I conducted field research; their emergence and functioning, and especially their alleged effect of uprooting peasants who moved into them, however, were not problems I started out with. All I saw were people who tried to make a living and enjoyed life if and when they had the modest means to do so. Unlike some of the best urban anthropology of the time, my entry to this urban culture had been neither youth oriented nor poverty oriented. The members of the Jamaa were adult married couples; most of the men were among the best-paid wage earners in the country. At any rate, much work in urban anthropology was, for my taste, too sociological, interested in relations, networks, and classes in which urbanites were caught up, not in what people living in towns created.

In the introduction to a collection of his essays, Scenes from African Urban Life (1992), A. L. Epstein, a member of the Manchester (that is, the dissident, rather leftish) school of British anthropology, gives us a glimpse of how confining one of the reigning paradigms in anthropology was when it came to studying African life in towns. Epstein conducted research on the Zambian copperbelt in the 1950s, covering, as he says, mainly “the conventional rubrics.” Eventually he became aware of the “distinctive flavor” of African life and permitted himself to be distracted from his serious work on social change by such divertissements as the inventive, often playful and funny ways urban people had with the Bemba language when they created a new variety that was spoken in the towns. Studying social networks was fine, but “there was a more direct route, to some extent open up by the greater freedom I enjoyed in Ndola for personal
contact with Africans but also by the rich material gathered by my research assistants, whose reports were studded by vernacular expressions employed by their collocutors. I am referring, of course, to language” (1992, xv; my emphasis).

Today his “Linguistic Innovation and Culture on the Copperbelt” (1959) is a classic. But when Epstein showed the paper to Max Gluckman, the leader of the Manchester school, Gluckman suggested that he submit this stuff on language and culture to an American journal (presumably because language and culture were not subjects to be taken seriously by social anthropologists at the time). Epstein goes on to note that

Gluckman [also] expressed doubts of quite another kind about the paper, feeling that my material was presented in such a way as to hold the African up to ridicule. I appreciated Gluckman’s sensitivity in the matter, but it also seemed to me that, in so far as some of the matter might provoke laughter, he failed to see that there is an important difference between laughing at and laughing with people. . . . Seen from this point of view, the new language of the towns was a creative response; with its wit and inventiveness CiCopperbelti served Africans as a means of placing their own distinctive stamp on this otherwise alien and often oppressive milieu. (1992, xv–xvi)

Gluckman was guided by an ethos of scientific seriousness that he shared with Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown. I doubt he would have taken kindly to the observation that his position expressed a kind of puritan disdain. Social theory, being concerned with order and identity, was at a loss when it came to dealing with the anarchic disrespect for rules and the self-mockery that were cultivated by urban Africans, not only in their ways with language.

Epstein felt no need to introduce the concept of popular culture, and he could not have come “from culture to popular culture” because for him, as a British social anthropologist, culture was not a point of departure (in the index of his book neither “culture” nor “popular culture” rates an entry). Still, I quoted him at length because he more than anticipated an insight that came to me during research on the Jamaa movement and, developed further, eventually led me to the “discovery” of popular culture as a guiding concept: Language and communication play a crucial role not only in our research, but also in providing practical foundations for life in the towns. As far as traditional societies were concerned, the “tribal” language was assumed to provide identity even by those who thought of talking as rather epiphenomenal to acting. Vehicular languages in the towns, like “syncretist” religious movements and various theatrical enactments known as “dances,” were regarded as disconnected symptoms of the loss of tribal identity. Epstein had also hit, at least implicitly, on an idea that was to be taken up and developed twenty years later, namely that the linguistic processes that produced languages like CiCopperbelti—pidginization and creolization—may offer models for understanding other expressions of popular culture.

To return to my own story, by the mid-seventies I decided to set aside work on the Jamaa and to postpone narrowly linguistic or sociolinguistic analysis of materials collected for the language and work project. Both projects had been theory driven; they were carefully reasoned out and planned beforehand, something that I began to realize could well have resulted in my finding out what I already knew had I not been forced by circumstances to radicalize my initial turn to language. That culture was like language was a long-held conviction, certainly among American and French anthropologists; that living a culture was like speaking was not such a popular idea (interest was in symbols and semiotics, meanings and codes, more than in pragmatics); and the notion that investigating a culture was a matter of productive communication was even less so. Without my being conscious of the connection at the time, increasing involvement with popular African culture made me feel more keenly just how ill equipped anthropological discourse was to deal with
contemporaneity." By mid-1973 I concluded the project on language and labor but stayed on in Shaba, taking a full-time position at the university. This change of roles changed the ways I experienced life in the city "after work." Getting to know Lubumbashi was now a matter of field leisure rather than fieldwork: I began taking in what came my way, enjoying purposeless conviviality, following my curiosity more than a research plan. My relations to the Jamaa relaxed, and I spent time hanging out—the best way to describe my contacts—with a group of local actors (most of them also accomplished musicians and dancers). I took a keen interest in the numerous paintings I discovered on the walls of living rooms, drinking places, and small shops. It did not take long before I began to pursue these new interests more systematically, recording conversations and performances and collecting a representative sample of pictures. Also, the more fluent I became in local Swahili, the more I realized that this language was not just a medium or vehicle but a way of life whose linguistic medium or expression told its own history and present predicament, effortlessly combining classical Bantu elements with innovations and borrowing from French and local languages.

As far as I can reconstruct things now, when I left Zaire at the end of 1974 to take a job at an American university, I was ready to recast my various researches as so many approaches to popular culture. I continued to explore theoretical issues raised by the turn to language (notably with work on the concept of genre that will have our attention in the next chapter) and published first results of research on popular painting. In 1977 I applied unsuccessfully to the agency that had sponsored research on language and labor for funds to work on a synthesis of previous work. The project was titled "Work, Art, and Communication: Urban Culture in a New Nation." Instead of the projected book, I wrote a tentative and programmatic essay, "Popular Culture in Africa: Findings and Conjectures" (1978), that, although anything but conclusive, did conclude my journey from culture to popular culture and seems to have contributed to putting the issue on the agenda of African studies.

**Popular Culture and History**

Disciplinary constraints reflecting fascination with stable culture (in American cultural anthropology) or with stable social structure (in British social anthropology) were one reason popular culture went more or less unnoticed. Another reason, strange as it may sound, was the thoroughly ahistorical approach to social change taken by social and cultural anthropology. History seemed irrelevant as far as traditional societies were concerned; almost by definition, they were supposed to have remained the same at least as long as their existence had been documented. "Peoples without history" was a synonym for "primitives" and other designations for societies supposedly untouched by history. Like so many other pronouncements that came easily to anthropological discourse, the denial of history was by no means straightforward. On one hand, history was equated with development and change: with "natural history" under the evolutionist paradigm, with "universal history" under diffusionism. On the other hand, history "proper" was reserved to the West that made it. History was acknowledged to happen among Europe's others only to the extent that they suffered it. Throughout most of this century, the "uprooted masses" in urban Africa were depicted as the ones who suffered most from "Westernization." Such concern was dictated both by ethics and by ideological preconceptions that made it all but impossible to consider what happened in African towns as history. Apparent lack of historical depth and actual lack of historical knowledge led students of African urban life to adopt theoretical constructs that allowed them to conceive of social change (or adaptation) as a dynamic, but ahistorical because "systemic," response to outside "factors" such as industrialization and Western education.10

Paradoxically, the 1950s and 1960s, when ahistorical studies of contemporary social and cultural elements prevailed in anthropology (encouraged by structuralism, functionalism, and structuralism-functionalist), were also the moment when the theoretical and,
above all, methodological tools for the study of African history, based on oral traditions, were forged and set to work. Most of the energy in this soon flourishing field, however, was directed to traditional political entities. Histories of African cities were rare. A notable exception that helped direct my attention toward developments I was later to call popular culture was a history of Elisabethville (now Lubumbashi) by Bruce Fetter (1976). As much as it was possible, given the biases and constraints of the time (the mid-1960s) when he conducted his research, Fetter relied on African witnesses to the town's history (Elisabethville had been incorporated in 1911; mining operations leading to initial agglomerations started in 1906). He also found a wealth of information on collective efforts that the supposedly passive victims of urbanization undertook to preserve what they wanted to save of their heritage and to create new forms of sociality (Fetter 1974). In Elisabethville, as elsewhere in Africa, these efforts were known as "ethnic associations," a term eagerly taken up by urban sociologists and anthropologists because it served to cover a conceptual gap and lack of information about African life between tradition and modernity. In retrospect, one feels that the notion of associations (often called "voluntary" to mark their spontaneous origin and to distinguish them, presumably, from necessary or imposed institutions) also had its use in fending off suspicions that Africans might be engaged in political mobilization. In the Congo, political parties were not allowed until the very end of colonial rule in 1960, though ethnic associations (and religious movements such as the Kitawala) were probably always suspected of using their cultural, folkloric activities as a cover for resistance and subversion.

One of the documents Fetter collected (without making much use of it in his book) was the remarkable Vocabulary of the Town of Elisabethville. It was commissioned by an "association" of former domestic servants and written or compiled by an African resident of the town, André Yav (see Fabian 1990a). This history, written in one of the local varieties of Swahili, covered colonization, urbanization, industry, and communication, but it also addressed daily life, entertainment, and urban lore. It happens to be the only document of its kind and scope we have for the region at this moment. There are reasons to assume that other histories were written and circulated and that this evidence for grassroots literacy (meaning texts that were produced spontaneously, without prompting from expatriate persons or institutions, in a language that most people were never taught to write) was not of recent origin.

In a newspaper published in Elisabethville before World War I a reporter informed his (presumably mostly expatriate) readers of a curious encounter with a recent African immigrant who spent his free time collecting and writing down the "customs" of the people. The journalist let it be known that, for a fee, he was allowed to glance at these writings. This prompted a stern reply (in French) in the same paper by the African concerned, confirming his work but categorically denying that money had passed between him and the reporter. As far as we can tell, this was the first documentation of "urban ethnography" in the colony. It also remained the only time an African was given a voice in the local press until the 1930s.

These examples of recordkeeping, chronicling, and indeed historiography, written by Africans for Africans, no matter how incidental and unsystematic they may have been, show that urban Africans have been affirming what sociologists often denied and largely ignored: that concerning life in the city there is a story to be told, protagonists to be introduced, and a plot to be unraveled—a story other than the artificial, jerky moves of "change" and "adaptation" granted to Africans in the scientific literature until not long ago.

My own work took me to history on two roads, one direct, the other somewhat circuitous. The former was opened up by the discovery of popular painting in Shaba that turned out to be an "art of memory" providing images for the recollections of life in towns by people living there. At the time, about a decade after Zairian independence, these experiences tended to coincide with those of colonial rule. After some early reports on that discovery (see above), it
took another decade and a half before I got around to my most recent project. This undertaking is a presentation and ethnography of what must count as one of the most remarkable works of popular historiography anywhere: a history of Zaire as painted and told by the Shaba genre painter Tshibumba Kanda Matulu (Fabian 1996).

I came to this formidable task prepared by an edition of the Vocabulary of the Town of Elisabethville mentioned above (Fabian 1990a), a text whose importance as direct evidence for popular historiography I had realized ever since Bruce Fetter gave me a copy in 1966. Like others who had copies of the document, I did nothing with it for more than twenty years, not only because other projects left me little time but also because the Vocabulary’s linguistic form made it forbiddingly difficult until I felt up to the task, having meanwhile taken what I referred to as my indirect road to history and the popular culture of Shaba. About 1978 I had begun to collect references to and copies of early descriptions of Swahili as spoken in the Congo, especially in the mining region of Katanga-Shaba (word lists, language manuals for colonial agents and missionaries, rudimentary grammars and phrase books). For a while I thought of my search (preferably for obscure and bad writings) as a hobby. But when I found the time to place this genre and corpus in its political and social context, matters became seriously interesting. The result was Language and Colonial Power, a colonial and social history of the emergence and appropriation of Swahili under Belgian rule (Fabian 1986).

To explain the importance of this study for my understanding of popular culture I need to go back, briefly, to doubts concerning African urban sociology and anthropology I began to have soon after my early work on the Jamaa. I suspected that certain theoretical orientations (not to speak of ideological interests) caused us to ignore cultural creations that had emerged in the cities. Eventually I realized that such blindness was a matter of commission, not omission. When I undertook to write Language and Colonial Power I was guided by the idea that, because we had buried it ourselves, we should be able uncover the evidence that might radically change our views of the history of popular Swahili—an argument, I believe, that can be extended to much of African popular culture. Colonial writing on Swahili had been of two kinds. One was resolutely practical and purported to represent the language as actually spoken, mainly in the context of industrial work and in exchanges between foreign residents and their African domestic servants, day laborers, and helpers in commerce. Not surprisingly, what these manuals described was a reduced, pidginized variety that failed to represent the language urban Africans spoke among themselves. The other genre, sponsored mainly by the missions, was guided by the aim to codify and standardize a high-level variety that would be appropriate for literary and religious use (similar to east coast Swahili, which was being standardized at about the same time by British colonial authorities). Again the result was a largely imaginary language spoken by no one, including those who had been taught to employ it in writing and in formal contexts such as religious teaching.

Here, I concluded, was a historically well documented instance of quite different, but complementary, colonial control interests that had created spaces of freedom in which Shaba Swahili, a language whose vitality shows no signs of weakening more than a generation after the end of direct colonial rule, could emerge and develop. Creolization was a handy concept to characterize this emergence of vehicular media between high and traditional culture, and I began to suggest that other forms, such as various popular arts, might be approached as outgrowths of creolization (Fabian 1978, 317). I never worked this out in detail, and today I realize this was all for the better. Any theory that sets out to demonstrate that linguistic models apply in other areas of culture works, to say the least, with analogies that in effect deny the historical specificity of cultural creation or, worse, the historical nature of culture itself. Homologies, resemblances due to common historical origins, are another matter. As distinctive practices, languages such as Shaba Swahili may make it possible for popular culture to keep together
forms of expression such as music, dance, theater, painting, magic, and religion, and historiography (or to switch freely from one to another), forms that are often kept apart by class and institutional boundaries in high culture. Many of the creators of popular culture I got to know in Shaba were “multimedia” artists; their audiences, as far as I could tell, were multimedia consumers. They had to be, because many of the messages contained in artistic creations and performances, especially those that were appreciated for their fineness and political courage, were assembled from different media and genres: songs citing proverbs, paintings evoking songs, religious movements cultivating drumming and dancing, political speeches assuming religious registers, historical accounts citing contemporary songs or traditional fables, and so forth. It is this closeness to origins that accounts for the particular historicity of popular culture, a trait that indeed has its homology in the type of language Swahili represents. Although they may appear deceptively simple in grammar and lexicon, creoles must be lived—practiced in context—to be spoken expertly. They make formidable demands on communicative competence as distinguished from linguistic competence. Translating texts, often even merely transcribing them from recordings, can be a daunting task. Similarly, to perceive and interpret the richness of popular expression requires historically situated, shared knowledge that an ethnographer can never fully acquire. The study of “humble” popular culture teaches us humility.

One matter that arises in these remarks on popular culture and history needs to be clarified. The attentive reader may be troubled when I speak here and elsewhere of the creators of popular culture as “artists.” Am I lumping or confusing art and culture? There are several ways to meet this question. First of all, producers of popular culture, such as popular musicians, painters, and actors, speak of themselves as artists. When they reflect on what they do they often identify their practices and creations as art and, in that respect, seem to set themselves apart from prophets, practitioners of magic, and historians. On the other hand, the historical juncture at which I encountered popular culture in Zaire does not permit the conclusion that art is perceived as a separate, let alone higher, domain of culture. If there are indications of an aesthetic distinction of art from mundane pursuits, there are many more indications of economic, practical inclusion. In conversations I had with actors and painters, they usually stressed that what they did was work and that, in the words of the painter Tshibumba, “work is one.” In other words, although some creators of popular culture, being aware of concepts that circulate globally, freely speak of art as their vocation, it would be historically questionable to project onto African popular culture an opposition between art and work (or more specifically between arts and crafts) that is of comparatively recent origin even in Western talk about culture.

**Popular Culture and Freedom**

I quoted Epstein expressing awareness of a link between researchers’ freedom and their ability to perceive certain aspects of African urban life. Today we realize that the very perception of a vast number of elements as instances or parts of popular culture was made possible only once ethnographers were liberated from constraints imposed by reigning theories, whether functionalism (sometimes with Marxist or socialist leanings) or structuralism-functionalism (few of whose adherents could be suspected of such leanings). For a long time anthropology was blind to popular culture in Africa, in the right eye as much as the left. Critical self-awareness, as well as knowledge accumulated during the past generation or so, seems to have liberated us from strictures of anthropological theory that caused Gluckman to discourage work like Epstein’s. The study of popular culture in Africa is alive and growing.

But researchers’ freedom is not the kind that first comes to mind when we talk about popular culture as resistance, as a means of liberation, as “weapons of the weak.” No doubt we made progress in our understanding when we recognized African “adaptations” to
urban-industrial conditions as creative and as assertive of the right to give shape and meaning to one's life. But there is still more to learn when we realize that popular culture emerging under colonial domination demanded freedom in more than one sense: politically, it asked for freedom for the people; theoretically, it required freedom among those who created and lived it. Oppression as such does not generate creative response;¹⁸ that is why quasi-mechanical models of "culture contact" did little to help us understand what happened when contact took place. Not mere exposure to power and oppression, but transformation of experience into communicable expressions, is at the origin of popular culture as resistance to colonial and postcolonial domination.

That freedom must exist for cultural creation to take place is, I believe, a position that needs to be maintained even if actual conditions in most postcolonial African countries, certainly in Zaire, seem to make it difficult to credit popular culture with much liberation. On the other hand, the demise of the apartheid regime created a climate of optimism that has led to a veritable explosion of studies of popular culture and its role in the struggle for freedom in South Africa. The longer I think about it, the more I am convinced that work on popular culture helps us to revive and keep alive the problem of freedom as an issue in anthropological theory.

The theoretical foundations for modern anthropology were laid in Enlightenment and romantic thought or, perhaps more accurately, in a confrontation between the two movements. Freedom, the philosophers argued, was a condition for emancipated citizens to exercise their faculties of reason and moral choice; romantic thinkers, while accepting this as a matter of principle, celebrated freedom as the prerequisite of artistic creation and as the essence of historical process. Both movements faced a problem (and proposed various solutions): How could they maintain these convictions in the face of necessity (of natural law) and destiny (as embodied in tradition)? To make a very long story very short, the tragedy of anthropology has been that, in its desire to establish itself as a sci-
masses by creating a collective illusion of something that can exist only individually? And so on and so forth.

When we introduce freedom into the discussion of popular culture, it seems that questions keep multiplying and the issue gets more and more confused. This, I hear colleagues argue, is what you get when you leave the ground of problems posed by empirical research and engage in speculations that our Enlightenment and romantic predecessors were so fond of. Yet I am not ready to grant what such objections ask me to grant: that there can be a purely philosophical point of departure in addressing freedom; the issue is always political, hence historically situated. So we may have to make another start: there is no justification for using the concept of freedom quasi-logically, a priori, in distinguishing high from low, elite from popular culture. This works both ways: elite-high culture is not a priori more free than mass-popular culture; conversely, expressions of high culture are not in themselves oppressive, and creations of popular culture are not in themselves liberating. Both assume such qualities only as part of a concrete political praxis. The problem of freedom poses itself within, not only between, high and popular, dominant and dominated culture. Our understanding of the particular history of oppression in which anthropology played its parts of collaborator and critic will not improve as long as we continue to imagine freely acting colonizers facing passive subjects acting only under coercion, or freedom-loving people resisting regimes and their agents that were just puppets of capitalist-imperialist economics and ideology. (Though the latter is certainly the more interesting proposition, if only because it goes against the grain of imperialism studies.) To state this position is anything but a denial of the facts of domination and oppression. It is a way of radicalizing the question and may clear a way out of the frequently stultifying reifications that seem to be the price of our justified and long overdue critique of anthropology’s implication in colonialism and imperialism.

If freedom is conceived not just as free will plus the absence of domination and constraint, but as the potential to transform one's thoughts, emotions, and experiences into creations that can be communicated and shared, and if “potential” unless it is just another abstract condition like absence of constraint, is recognized by its realizations, then it follows that there can never be freedom as a state of grace, permanent and continuous. As a quality of the process of human self-realization, freedom cannot be anything but contradictory and discontinuous or precarious. Freedom, in dialectical parlance, comes in moments. That is an idea I brought away from many years of work on popular culture; it inspired the title for this book. Hence the concrete instances I will examine should also be understood as moments that provided insight rather than as cases systematically collected.

We should expect such an approach to be criticized as utopian and politically objectionable. It seems that in the singular freedom, like culture, is a thoroughly undemocratic concept. Must freedom be thought of in the plural? That it can be talked about in the plural is a matter of record. There are (historical) usages—for instance, Freiheit, limited privileges and dispensations granted by rulers and governments long before the ideal of general freedom and emancipation was conceived. Later, when freedom was enshrined as a supreme value in revolutionary constitutions, plurality quickly remerged in a host of adjectival qualifications, codified and classified as kinds of freedom from or of x, y, z. When at one point I used the search words “freedom” and “culture” to browse through the online catalog of an American university library (not the best, not the worst), I made an interesting observation. I found only three works listed under freedom without a qualifier (one of them turned out to be a book on the concept of freedom in Lessing or Goethe). There were endless lists of items on what I called freedom with adjectival qualifications. By far the longest (length reflecting number of works in the library) was made up of entries treating “freedom of the press.” However limited the value of such a survey may be, it says something about the place of freedom in public academic consciousness.

Of course further objections may be raised against this attempt
to make freedom again an issue in our theorizing about culture. What counts, one could say, are freedoms, civil liberties, rights whose exercise must be unimpeded and whose violation should be prosecuted and punished. Such a quasi-legal understanding of freedom is, it seems, much better suited to empirical inquiries into relations between freedom and popular culture. Up to a point this is undoubtedly so, though it is not certain that such studies would come up with simple “more rights more popular culture” results. Restrictions of mobility, limited access to education, censoring of the press and other publications, controls on religious and other associations, imposed official languages and literacies, expropriation of land and forced cultivation, ethnic identities invented for administrative purposes—all of them were denials of basic rights practiced during colonial times. They must have stilled free and creative development of cultural expression, though we can only guess to what extent. We don’t have to guess, we know, that in the former Belgian Congo deportation of religious leaders, for instance, spread new religious messages throughout the colony. Intellectual acumen or even genius that could not express itself in institutions of higher learning was applied to informal philosophies and histories that outlived official ideologies. Attempts, often benevolent, to promote what counted as African art hardly made a dent in the rise of popular painting, music, and dance. In fact, repressive institutions such as the colonial army became the cradle, or at least a cradle, of the Zairian popular music that was later to sweep the continent (Kazadi 1979). Political opinion and critique, prohibited by the regime, were channeled into ironic song texts and theatrical comedy. Institutions aimed at controlling the youth and the workforce, such as the Boy Scouts and other youth associations, sports organizations, and the like, produced networks, practices, discourses, and channels for leadership the colonizers would never have dreamed of encouraging. Most of these hard-won spaces of freedom remained open when, after a brief period of euphoric hope, absentee colonialism maintained a totalitarian regime that caused many Africans to en-

tertain nostalgic views of colonial times. Should all of this be dismissed as sentimentalism only because, in the approach I advocate here, I argue that it cannot be understood without introducing into our theory a historically romantic (not sentimental) notion of freedom as a condition of popular culture?

**Alterity and Popular Culture**

In my thought, research, and writing, anthropology and popular culture have been linked. There is of course no reason to assume that for other anthropologists, or other students of popular culture, this link is as natural and inevitable as I came to perceive it. What counts as an object of anthropological study is a matter of debate. A widespread opinion, reflected in current research practices, holds that anthropology, being a kind of natural science of conduct and culture, can and should direct its attention to “all things human,” from cocktail waitressing to head-hunting (actually, the other way around, since an evolutionary perspective usually goes with the natural science view). I belong to those who believe that, although our discipline’s future may be open, its past is not. Ours is a science that not only is de facto historically situated (all sciences are), but whose practice, from lofty theory down to methods and techniques, requires that we understand our place in history. How we assumed and maintained that place is open to informed interpretation (and in that sense the past is open, after all). But there can be no doubt that the emergence of anthropology is tied to the question of alterity. Anthropology did not find its object, it construed it as an other. If that is so, otherness is an issue in whatever anthropology undertakes to study, including popular culture.

Let me illustrate this point, again with a focus on Africa. In colonial times, many expressions we would now consider part of popular African culture (dress fashions, forms and places of entertainment, living styles, use of European languages, religious syncretism) were perceived (and represented) as inept apings, inauthentic
copies of Western culture. Often they were called funny; most of the time they were quickly denounced as ridiculous. Why couldn't colonials just have fun with what they perceived as funny? Why did they become defensive-aggressive when they saw that Africans had taken hold of something the Europeans considered theirs? The most plausible reason (remember Gluckman’s embarrassment and anxiety when he was faced with Epstein’s funny CiCopperbelti) seems to be that such features were experienced as threatening, or at any rate not fitting, constructions of the colonized as an other. Actually, colonial discourse construed two kinds of alterity (a distinction that was important to colonial ideology): the traditional, rural other as the true native, and the modern, urban other as the alienated native. The distinction served to keep the native authentic as an other for an authentic self. To get through to the true African, to discover genuine African thought, was an aim proclaimed by colonial administrations and missions from the early days on. The more authenticity was construed as part of the colonial scheme of things, the more urgent it became to find such authenticity locally, in tribal tradition. Modernity was to be brought to Africa, not achieved there; the trick of “native policies” was to control and if necessary to withhold modernity whenever actual modern Africans made their presence felt.

Theories of modernization shared a tragic stance that had been cultivated by anthropology since its beginnings: the peoples the West came in contact with were said to be doomed; ethnography’s objects were always disappearing objects. In anthropology, theory of culture established itself as a theory of disappearance (Fabian 1991, chap. 10). Almost a century before the 1950s, the decade when studies of the purportedly disastrous effects of modernization were at their peak, lamenting the disappearance of tradition, travelers and ethnographers hit that note when they decei’d incipient urbanization (some of which predated the effective establishment of colonial rule). The destructive force of ethnology was now seen to be at work once removed (or redoubled): the theoretically disappearing native, victim of imposed images, disappears practically in towns that are the sites of modernity. Leo Frobenius, the celebrated Africanist, waxed poetic (as he was wont to do) when he concluded his dirge Das sterbende Africa: Die Sehne eines Erdeits (Dying Africa: The soul of a continent) with this appeal to students of Africa’s past:

Grabt!
Aber achtet darauf, daß die Scherben nicht euch begraben.
Erlebt!
Unter jenen, die durch uns sterben.
Sterben müssen.
Erlebt es vor ihrem Tode.
Damit ihr die Wiederaufstehung verstehen lernt!

[Keep digging! But see to it that the shreds don’t bury you. Experience life. Among those who die through us. Must die. Experience it before they die. So that you learn to understand resurrection.] (1928, 503)

Did he have a premonition of the emergence of a vigorous contemporary African culture? Or even of the practical and theoretical learning processes that were required to perceive modern African culture as something in its own right?

Before I go on to consider aspects of our discipline’s history that may account for a special kind of affinity between anthropology and popular culture, I would like to take another crack at interpreting negative reactions to African modernity. Though this inevitably simplifies matters, it could be said that imitation was a key concept in colonial perceptions of popular culture (evolution, as in évoluté, a particularly Belgian epithet for modern Africans, was always in the background, assimilation often in the foreground of colonial discourse). Adaptation was another term current especially in (Catholic) theories of missionizing and deserves more attention than I can
give it here. It had its precedents as far back as the sixteenth-century debates between Jesuits and Franciscans about how far Chinese philosophy and customs could be integrated with Christianity. In its modern version, adaptation allowed for a two-way process whereby elements of traditional African culture—art, architecture, music, and dance—were envisaged as contributing to a contemporary, yet specifically African Christianity.

In postcolonial times creativity became a key concept in studies of social change. Remember this was the critical concept that inspired the study of African religious movements as it moved from cataloging African reactions to Christianity to conceptualizing innovative appropriations and new syntheses. This change of paradigms—which marked my own trajectory—was at first directed against dominant, modern culturalism and its inability to conceive of process as anything but "change" (conceptualized around notions such as deviance, dysfunctional impact, and the reestablishment of social equilibrium). Is it correct to say that the "creative native" replaced the "disappearing native"? Tradition had, perversely, been thought of as disappearance (perversely, because talk of tradition seemed to emphasize the force of time and the weight of history while in fact it served to describe disappearance as removal from time and contemporaneity). This view established a new danger and a task for critical reflection: Is "creative popular culture" once again just a foil for construing an other against a perception of the Western self caught up in inauthentic mass production and consumption? I leave these questions unanswered for the time being. In fact I shall add another one: When we rejected condescending colonial views of African imitations of Western culture, did we not also deprive ourselves of insights by not considering that these perceptions may have had a core of truth? What I have in mind is the age-old, respectable concept of mimesis. As Fritz Kramer's essay (1993) on the subject has shown, Africans, probably long before modern colonization, have employed mimetic modes of confronting and construing alterity that produced, among other things, some of the most striking creations of African visual and performative art. What this means as regards the historical depth of processes we now study as popular culture remains to be explored. The issue of historical depth raises daunting questions I cannot even begin to discuss. Must we not consider the cultures of the African diaspora (maroons in the Caribbean, Afro-Brazilians, African Americans, and other "slave cultures") as contiguous, contemporary expressions, many of which developed on both sides of the Atlantic as a kind of popular culture? (The rise of creole languages, the origins of modern African music, certain religious symbols and practices such as the cults of the mermaid—mammy wata, yemanja, sirène, madre agua—are obvious examples.)

Historical depth can also be added to the question of relations between anthropology and popular culture when we consider this: Thinking, talking, and writing, as we seem to do, with the concepts and terms of established high culture, how can we avoid having our inquiries informed by control interests that characterize relations between elitist and popular culture? Such questions evoke dilemmas of anthropological research and writing that may be summarized as follows. Writing—practicing literacy—is always tied to regimes of power. Therefore ethnography—writing about other peoples—is inevitably an exercise of power. How can such a practice serve the aims of critical understanding and liberation from political oppression? A focus on popular culture may lead us to consider the intriguing possibility of approaching this problem from a different perspective. Pressing anthropology into a general scheme of discourses that serve oppression and control in relations between the West and the rest overlooks the specific constellations that exist whenever culture tout court is being challenged by popular culture. Much has been made of the complicity of our discipline in colonialism and imperialism; predictably, such deserved criticism is being countered by pointing to anthropology's legitimate descent from the Enlightenment, from which it inherited a "reformatory" (Tylor),

Critical attitude toward religious bigotry, racism, and cultural pro-
vercialism—at least on balance. The present face-off between left and right intellectual positions on almost everything that touches on culture is not likely to promote better understanding of anthropology’s role in bringing about developments such as African popular culture.

But what if we were to examine the following hypothesis? Viewed with the benefit of hindsight, based on our current understanding of processes from which popular culture emerged globally, anthropology itself may have to be seen as a practice of the kind we conceptualize as popular culture. Consider the philosophical dilettantism and encyclopedism of our founders, the entrepreneurial approach to publishing “new” systems for mass consumption (“evolutionism” would be an example), the marketing of ethnographic information in popular media from the German Gartenlaube, long defunct, to National Geographic, very much alive. Add to this a penchant for, and involvement with, expositions, Volkerschauen as popular spectacles, such as—to give a French example—the exhibits in the Jardin d’Acclimatation. Take into account the titillation of exotic—and “ancient”—sex, violence, fetishes, and rituals. In short, think of the considerable entertainment value of ethnologia, and you get an idea of what I am driving at with my hypothesis. It may be a rude but salutary awakening for our discipline if, after all the time spent, not without success, on gaining academic, high-culture respectability, we were to realize that all along we had our roots, gained our strength, from the same soil from which emerge the ever unruly, vital, and creative movements in music, dance, theater, the visual arts, and literature that we try to catch with the concept of popular culture. All these are but hints and suggestions. Close links between anthropology and popular culture existed (and need to be explored more fully) through the Christian missions and their promotion of a distinctive literature and ethnographic lore for popular consumption. Somewhat esoteric, but nonetheless to the point, were connections between anthropology and spiritism. Of course the search for such connections should not cover only the

nineteenth-century beginnings of our discipline. More recently, film and television have been drawing on anthropology, and rapidly developing technologies of interactive learning are likely to increase its contribution to popular entertainment.

Modern mass tourism to the Third World, especially in its educational and philanthropic varieties, also needs to be seen in this light. In fact, we may even have to consider that the practices of empirical research in anthropology we call fieldwork, though ostensibly modeled on habits of collecting and observing that were developed by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century natural history, have in fact been attempts, however halfhearted and clumsy, to “join the dance” of all those movements of survival that our theories classified as acculturation, syncretism, revival, social change, and modernization. Most people still think that what distinguishes anthropology from sociology is that our discipline wants to gain and preserve knowledge of premodern, preindustrial cultures. But the timing alone suggests differently: field research as part of our professionalization did not become obligatory before the first decade or so of this century, after the discipline had gained academic recognition. All along, anthropology’s coeval subject has been the contemporary world of cultures and societies that had become the targets of Western expansion. Calling what we studied in these societies savage, primitive, tribal, or traditional expressed our wishes, desires (and occasionally orders we received), which we may or may not have shared with the people we encountered in field research. By the time we got to them, the practices of living these cultures and the practices of studying them were interconnected in ways that we suspected only in rare moments.

Why, given all these connections, did it take anthropologists so long to get seriously interested in popular culture and to suspect that popular culture and anthropology might be homologous practices? At least as far as African studies is concerned, one could argue that the decolonization of Africa created the conditions for a decolonization of our minds that made us “discover” popular culture
as the fascinating and urgent subject of study we now recognize it to be. Jan Vansina, in a candid reappraisal of his work as an ethnographer, confirms my observations on the blinding effect of the colonial situation:

It is easy now to see that a description of Kuba institutions and ways of life really made little sense without its colonial context. But even though I myself, like everyone else, was involved all the time in negotiating colonial situations, I simply missed the point. I was blinded by the social anthropology of the day and its emphasis on an atemporal ethnographic present... It would take fifteen years for me to realize fully how efficiently this fiction of an ethnographic present had hidden the workings of the colonial situation. (1994, 27)

At the same time, if anthropology somehow belongs to popular culture, this should lead us to ponder the limits—in fact the eventually self-liquidating nature of popular culture as a discourse distinct from, and opposed to, discourses on elitist and traditional culture. Anthropological studies of popular culture are, or should be, part of the blurring of boundaries between ethnology-anthropology and history (history tout court, not just “oral” or ethnohistory). “Historicizing” of our discipline is under way and has changed it at least as profoundly as the “literary turn.”

It is perhaps no longer fashionable to speak of imperialism, but who would deny that power is still exercised by societies that are organized as nation-states (though they may be used by multinational business interests) over other societies whose political institutions are shaky and whose economy, if not reduced to subsistence production, is based on exporting cash crops and mineral resources? Reasoning that discourses such as anthropology are oppressive because they are produced by the former and pronounced about the latter once had the simplicity and convincingness that purely referential theories of language maintained as long as we could believe

in them. Matters become more complex when we think of anthropology and popular culture together. The idea that anthropology belongs to discourses of power is perhaps not affected by the proposal to think of it as a kind of part of popular culture. But how it serves power becomes an open question. The scenario of collaboration, theoretical and practical, that fit an era of direct colonization may no longer be appropriate. Could it be that anthropology, at least for moments, actually parodies, subverts, and resists imperialism—not so much by intentions or correct political attitudes as by its practices and creations, the way popular culture challenges the powers that be?

*The Moral of the Tale*

There can be no conclusion to this chapter. Though argumentative at times, it has told a scholarly journey that, without being planned as such, led to the discovery of popular culture in more than one sense: to the discovery of things, words, and practices previously unnoticed, and to a theoretical frame capable of accommodating these new findings. Keeping in mind that my concerns have been focused on what I found in an urban-industrial context in Zaire during a postcolonial period of almost thirty years, the moral of my tale is this: We need a concept of popular culture. To argue that we can make do with the classical evolutionary distinction between primitive and civilized would amount to something that even the staunchest advocates of Culture with a capital C would hesitate to propose. A simple distinction of popular culture as low culture as opposed to high culture is not worth considering, although such an opposition is often tacitly assumed when contemporary African ways of life are compared with traditional African culture. To call what we are after folk culture would be misleading inasmuch as this would commit us to think of its products as folklore. Something as vital and central to contemporary Africa as its popular culture simply does not fit the connotations of quaintness and marginality
that folklore carries, certainly in the nontechnical understanding of the term outside the discipline of folklore studies. Nor is there a straight line of descent from Volkskultur discovered in the nineteenth century (or for that matter from the distinction between great and little traditions that informed so much anthropological work, especially in Latin America) to what we now conceptualize as popular culture. Its contemporaneity demands that we pay attention to concerns such as commoditization, mass media, mass consumption, and globalization. No one engaged in the study of popular culture can ignore these issues, though it is equally true that what we try to catch with the theory of popular culture cannot be reduced to any one of them. Mass culture, to continue our list of possible candidates, is too broad; workers' culture is too narrow, and so is urban or industrial culture. All of these designations suggest only some aspects of processes that need to be studied in their African specificity and may or may not converge with what the terms denote in Europe or North America. Counterculture wouldn't be bad, because it does catch a characteristic of African popular culture, but it is again disqualified by its specific, narrow connotations (youth, drugs, new religions) in Euramerican societies.

All this is not to say I am about to advocate a parochial concept of popular culture tailored to ethnographic research in Shaba. What I have in mind is ultimately the claim that popular culture forces us to rethink the idea of culture itself. If I had to describe the decisive theoretical consequences, or at any rate the concomitants, of a turn to popular culture, I would name four.

First, the concept of popular culture enables us to think about culture not only in the plural but as in itself plural. Moral authority and constraints, rational consistency and purpose (all of this supported by clearly defined roles and institutions) were once projected onto culture as a system. Such a view must give way to considering culture a praxis that also entails contradiction, contestation, and experimentation; in short, negativity and freedom.

Second, popular culture cannot be thought of as a quasi-timeless symbolic chart of common representations marking well-defined spaces of identity. Instead, it encourages us to conceive of cultural practices as creative expressions and joint performances in shared time. More than that, shared time is also recognized as the condition of studying and understanding popular culture, which can only be experienced as contemporaneous and contemporary. Popular culture is of and in the same time as the anthropologist’s culture.

Third, it follows from these premises that inquiries into popular culture have a political dimension; relations of power need to be considered not just as imposed by colonial imperialism but as inherent in cultural processes that are predicated as much on freedom and confrontation as on norms and integration.

For my fourth observation I need to back up briefly. The classical conception envisaged culture as hovering somewhere above the world of needs and necessities. Therefore the study of material conditions tended to be relegated to biology and economics. When questions of interdependence or determination arose they divided theoreticians into hostile tribes of, for instance, symbolic anthropologists and cultural materialists. We now begin to realize that both positions could be upheld only because idealists and materialists alike had thoroughly abstract visions of culture as an object of research. Thought about popular culture has if not brought about, then certainly encouraged inquiries into the materiality of culture. True, concern for the body and embodiment may have had other origins (for instance, in gender studies). The rehabilitation of the senses proclaimed against visualism was proposed for epistemological reasons; material culture, long a marginal subdiscipline, has seen a remarkable theoretical revival in recent years. But all the considerations above can and must be brought together when we take up the study of popular culture.

Although popular culture liberates us from elitist, hierarchical, and integrative thought about culture, it does not do away with the deepest and most encompassing problem that any theory of culture raises or hides, as the case may be: How should we think about
confrontations between us and them, self and other, Occident and Orient, the West and the rest? There is an obvious overlap between popular culture and what we perceive as the reemergence of ethnicity, regionalism, and nationalism, where hope and horror creating and killing seem to be blend in ways that defy rational analysis. Work on popular culture has become a very serious game indeed.

“There is a crack, a crack in everything, that’s how the light gets in,” says the popular poet and singer Leonard Cohen. The theory of popular culture is a way to reveal or open cracks in received culture theory. Our aim should be to formulate insights and come up with findings that make the adjective “popular” unnecessary. If and when this happens, it may turn out that we don’t need the noun “culture” either. But that is perhaps too much to hope for.

In the meantime, I think both theorizing about popular culture and doing empirical research on it should be guided by a few simple questions: When we employ the concept, what does it lump, bring together, that the classical concept of culture is incapable of joining? What does popular culture separate or distinguish that culture tout court lumps together? What comes to mind here is above all the antagonism, the contradictions, and the play that an integrationist concept of culture tends to cover rather than reveal. It will take time and the work of researchers who are now starting out to answer a last, disquieting question. By now we know pretty well what we catch with the concept of popular culture, but what do we miss?

Meanwhile . . . and Elsewhere: A Bibliographical Note

I never started out with a theory of popular culture. When I thought I needed one I formulated my own programmatic statement ad hoc (Fabian 1978), without the benefit of wide reading on the subject. That paper still describes the orientation I use in current work. When, in the early 1980s a plan to organize, with Peter Burke and others, an interdisciplinary symposium on popular culture had to be abandoned for lack of funding, I turned to specific projects, setting aside generalizing reflections until I had to think about these essays. I still have no ambition to take on the literature on the subject. But precisely because I will follow my own train of thought, I should offer a few observations on how my work relates to the current state of debate.

As far as I can see, most of the elements of current debates were assembled by the mid- or late seventies (see, for instance, Plojo and Labourie 1979; closely related issues were discussed at the same time under the heading “working-class culture,” for instance, Clarke, Critcher, and Johnson 1979). A trend that was visible then has become more pronounced through the years: different national interests have produced different discourses, a topic that is addressed and exemplified in the important work on contemporary bourgeois culture by Orvel Löfgren (c.g., 1989). Therefore, when browsing through works that deal with popular culture one finds only partial overlap and sometimes none at all. In Germany, for instance, even a pioneering study such as Bausinger’s (1986), critical of an ahistorical conception of folklore and Volkskultur, cannot escape a heritage of thought that makes issues such as authenticity central (addressing topics such as kitsch that are all but ignored in recent writings on mass culture). In the United States popular culture is (almost) synonymous with mass media culture. To me this is exemplified by a book I picked up eagerly and put down with considerable disappointment: a study titled Popular Culture Genres that appeared in the series Foundations of Popular Culture (Berger 1992). On the other hand, I was both impressed and made uneasy when I read Greil Marcus’s remarkable Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century (1989). He takes an approach to popular music (rock and punk) that is similar to some of the most interesting work on popular religion (especially on its continuity with hermetic traditions). Construing a kind of parallel, almost conspiratorial, history for popular culture, Marcus’s approach makes it possible to celebrate
the challenge popular culture puts forth while at the same time containing that challenge in a "secret history." To reserve for popular culture its own history, as it were, is a temptation we must resist. Popular culture study is not antiestablishment just because of its subject.

When I had convinced myself that the American perspective on popular culture was probably furthest removed from the one that has been guiding my own work, I came upon George Lipsitz's Time Passages (1990). Lipsitz offers convincing arguments against excluding anything from popular culture just because it is mass-produced, and he comes to conclusions about collective memory and the recuperation of history in popular culture that are quite similar to my own. Incidentally, with a remark (a tantalizing hint, really) on the common origins of his discipline, history, and commercialized leisure, the distinctive form of popular culture he studies (1990, 5), he points in the same direction as my observations on homologies between anthropology and popular culture.

In spite of a seemingly ever increasing diversity of interests and approaches that has made the concept at the same time fashionable and all but unmanageable, popular culture has shown remarkable staying power. As some of the recent work I found most interesting shows, this may be due to the growing realization that definitions and theoretical schemes are of limited value in understanding what might be called the historicity of popular culture, as well as the historicity of any possible discourse about popular culture. In other words, studies of popular culture are valuable to the extent that they make visible their own genesis.

The history of the term and concept as a history of its uses is explored by Morag Shiach (1989). Though its orientation is mainly literary and British, I would recommend her study as an excellent introduction to discourses on popular culture. She begins with a critical analysis of the entry "popular" in the Oxford English Dictionary and then applies her findings in a series of essays on topics ranging from peasant poets in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to contemporary television. Shiach touches, as far as I can see, on most of the issues I have discussed in this chapter or will take up later. She also makes a convincing effort to explain the absence of women from accounts of popular culture (9): "Women disappear from accounts of popular culture as a result of particular methodological preoccupations and practices. They are also constantly marginalized in narratives of popular culture. Critics offer 'popular culture' as heroic narrative of authenticity and coherence vs. triviality and decay. Such a narrative must have a hero, who is, of course, male" (13). Although this absence comes in degrees, I have been aware of it in others' work as well as my own. In my case it is too late now to remedy this on the side of research; there will be some reflection, though, on what Shiach calls "methodological preoccupations and practices."

One of the most encompassing attempts to discern popular culture as a subject shared by history, anthropology, sociology, and cultural criticism is a reader edited by Chandra Mukerji and Michael Schudson (1991). Their approach has its merits in that it creates interesting links within a wide range of writing, but I have difficulty recognizing anthropology's road to popular culture in the contributions that appear in the section devoted to our discipline.

William Rowe and Vivian Schelling's Memory and Modernity (1991) is a work whose orientation I found congenial. They too point out that to "call something popular carries an implied opposition" (2). They criticize both romantic valuation of "authentic rural culture under threat from industrialization" and modern conceptions equating popular culture with mass culture, then adopt a third position that they trace to "Marx and beyond" and that "ascribes to popular culture an emancipatory and utopian charge, whereby the practices of the oppressed classes contain within them resources for imagining an alternative future society" (2).

Both Shiach and Rowe and Schelling draw on Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony when it comes to understanding how popular culture is involved in relations of power. I especially like Rowe and

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Popular Culture in Anthropology

36

Popular Culture in Anthropology

37
Schelling's suggestion that "one way of developing [Gramsci's] insights is to take popular culture not as a given view of the world but as a space or series of spaces where popular subjects, as distinct from members of ruling groups, are formed" (1991, 10). A little later they spell out one of the consequences: "When the popular is defined not as an object, a meaning or a social group, but as a site—or, more accurately, a series of dispersed sites [here is an echo from Foucault]—then it generates a principle of opposition to the idea, imposed by authoritarian liberalism or by populism, of the nation as single body" (ibid.). They too argue that to "place the relationships between dominant power and the popular inside a vocabulary of conformity versus resistance entails simplification and distortion" (11). This assertion (with a focus on resistance studies in general) is further developed in a comprehensive critical essay by Sherry Ortner (1995), and I will back it up with ethnographic evidence in the next chapter.

Like others, I find it hard to resist using James C. Scott's imaginative and accurate phrase when I think and talk about the broader political significance of various expressions of popular culture: these are indeed "weapons of the weak." I also like his list of everyday forms of resistance: "foot dragging, dissimulation, desertion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so on" (Scott 1985, xvi). I admire the close ethnographic attention he paid to such manifestations of a "venerable popular culture of resistance" (xvii) as well as the general contribution his book makes to the debate on resistance. At the same time, we should not forget that Scott's study focused on peasants. It will become clear that inquiries into urban resistance often face different challenges, among them formidable problems of scale. How can one reasonably generalize from ethnographic research conducted in cities with populations that range from 200,000 to perhaps 890,000? Such problems would be unmanageable if it were not for the emergence of popular culture as a vast array of mediations of experience—embodiments, objects, practices, texts, images—that are shared by the masses and are the access routes individual researchers can take. This is why my list of forms of resistance, though Scott's enumeration fits my findings, also includes religious dissent and innovation, pop music, theater, genre painting, historiography, "and so on."

The two aspects of mediation I referred to—lived experience and research—are dealt with admirably in a book that, though the term hardly ever occurs in it, is one of the most compelling studies of popular culture (and of anthropology in a contemporary urban context) I have come across recently: James Siegel's Solo in the New Order (1986). Siegel's book invites comparison with a pioneering anthropological study of popular theater that should also be mentioned here, James Peacock's Rites of Modernization (1968), written under the then reigning paradigm of culturalism whose power and limits it illustrates.

I should at least mention the relevance to popular culture studies of the work on "everyday life," developed especially in France, and acknowledge inspiration from, among others, the writings of Michel de Certeau (1984), especially his essay "Reading as Poaching" in the volume cited. Interest in the quotidian and the theoretical reasons that make the quotidian interesting is beginning to produce outstanding studies on work and leisure in colonial towns in Africa. Hansen (1989), White (1990), and Martin (1995) are examples. Martin's work especially, about Kinshasa's sister city Brazzaville, is a rich source for the origins of popular culture on both sides of the Congo. Regional surveys are beginning to appear (Grabner 1992), but except for certain forms of expression such as music, painting, or theater, I am not aware of writings on popular culture dealing with Africa as a whole.

Feelings that the concept I have been proposing may be, after all, too much tailored to Third World circumstances will be dispelled by the theoretical convergences I found in a remarkable historical essay on the Viennese operetta and its origins in the multicultural world of the Habsburg empire (Csáky 1996, a book I hope will soon be available in English). By way of lateral association, this brings up
the notion of an urban cultural scene, a concept that may prove useful in localizing centers of the production of contemporary African culture. "Scene" guides a documentary exploration of cultural creativity in Lagos (Brockmann and Höttler 1994), which in a similar form could also be conducted in other African capitals.

When I think about important readings on the subject of popular culture, I must at least include a global reference to the ethnography of speaking or communication (which, in a more technical incarnation, may be called interactive sociolinguistics; Hymes 1974). At its best, it laid the foundations for the kind of theory of popular culture I have been circumscribing in this essay: it freed us from an essentially referential theory of language (and by extension, of culture) and opened up a vast field of inquiries into the pragmatics of culture (giving concepts such as performance their deserved place next to, and beyond, signification, meaning, orientation, and motivation). As a conscious critique of formalist linguistics, decidedly high culture and text oriented, this was certainly a movement of popular resistance (one of those homologies between anthropology and popular culture I speculated about earlier). It signaled and promoted convergence between the ethnography of contemporary everyday life and folklore studies, sometimes to the point that the two are distinguished only by institutional divisions. For an early, important example see the collection of papers edited by Dan Ben-Amos (1976), originally published in the journal Genre in 1969 and 1971. The relevance of this theoretical trend to popular culture studies is also clear in the work of Richard Bauman (1977, 1986) and especially in the recent study by Elizabeth Tonkin (1992). Finally, I want to recommend the essays by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o in his Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms (1993). They provide an African insider's counterpoint as well as a "universalist" approach to contemporary African culture, a perspective outsider specialists should strive to attain.

2

Power Within: Genres in Popular Culture

In its acknowledged capacity to organize resistance to abusive (or intrusive) power, popular culture draws on or invents various genres of representation and performance. What about the notion of genre itself? Genre is a concept of wide, if diffuse, popularity whose cognitive or aesthetic meaning is seldom extended to include relations of power (other than the power of critics who pronounce on generic rules and qualities). Anthropological studies of popular culture can contribute to the discussion by showing how genre works when it does work, what it accomplishes, and what it prevents. From my own first experiment with genre as part of a theory of cultural emergence, I learned that the concept makes us aware of contradictions calling for resolution: although genre empowers, it may also be experienced as overpowering; genre enables, genre constrains. Looking at concrete situations and cases can teach us that these seemingly contradictory qualities are not divided between the powerful and the powerless. In other words, when we raise the question of power in our exploration of popular culture, reaction or resistance to domination is not the only issue to be addressed, or even the most significant. Otherwise we would have to assume that popular culture is essentially pseudomorphous, having its specific forms determined by the shapes of power it must resist or accommodate to rather than by what it invents.

Genre and Power

"Genre," derived from the Latin genus (whose root is shared by many other terms such as general, but also "gender" and "genera-