



The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art

By James Clifford

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The Predicament of Culture is a critical ethnography of the West in its changing relations with other societies. Analyzing cultural practices such as anthropology, travel writing, collecting, and museum displays of tribal art, Clifford shows authoritative accounts of other ways of life to be contingent fictions, now actively contested in postcolonial contexts. His critique raises questions of global significance: Who has the authority to speak for any group's identity and authenticity? What are the essential elements and boundaries of a culture? How do self and "the other" clash in the encounters of ethnography, travel, and modern interethnic relations? In discussions of ethnography, surrealism, museums, and emergent tribal arts, Clifford probes the late-twentieth century predicament of living simultaneously within, between, and after culture.

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Editorial Review

From Library Journal

Clifford's concern is a "pervasive post-colonial crisis of ethnographic authority." Knowledge of non-Western peoples has been shaped by "a Western will to power," but peoples whose stories and cultures were once articulated by outsiders are now speaking for themselves. Are traditional cultures destined to be lost? Who has the authority to define a culture, to identify and authenticate the current transformations of traditional cultures? Why have exotic "tribal" objects been collected and valued as "art"? Clifford pursues such questions in a wide range of contexts. The result is always accessible, and often fascinating or provocative; but one looks forward to a concise, systematic exposition of the issues Clifford has raised. Richard Kuczkowski, Dominican Coll., Blauvelt, N.Y.

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Review

The Predicament of Culture is a work of sustained brilliance, packed with simply wonderful gifts for the reader. The several chapters on French anthropology and ethnographic surrealism are fascinating, and somehow as urgent as the ones on collecting or on the relentless intertranslating of cultural demands, or as the theme that we must rethink this entire dimension of human existence. It is also an extremely wise book. Since wisdom and brilliance rarely go together, it is plain that James Clifford is himself one of our cultural treasures. (Arthur C. Danto *New York Times Book Review*)

Clifford is original and very nearly unique. He is one of the few persons who connects history, literature, and anthropology. He's had an enormous impact because he provides a new perspective on the study of culture that would almost certainly never have been generated from within anthropology itself. (Clifford Geertz)

Clifford's reflections are salutary. They are not self-serving, allowing Clifford entry by a backdoor into a community which often threatens the exclusivity of a private club. By breaking with narrow professional definitions of anthropology, Clifford broadens its vision. Anthropology again becomes the exploration of the grounds of humanity in its original, general, and philosophically fundamental sense. (Bruce Kapferer *Critique of Anthropology*)

With an intellectual modesty that belies his sweeping global perspective, Clifford focuses on who has the authority to speak for any group's identity and authenticity. As he traces the development of twentieth-century anthropology, Clifford locates affinities between anthropology and avant-garde art, making this book one of the most readable introductions to contemporary cultural criticism. (Mary Warner Marien *Utne Reader*)

Review

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--Clifford Geertz

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