Encompassing Others
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THE MAGIC OF MODERNITY IN MELANESIA

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For my wife, Susan, my daughter, Laura, and my friend, Skip
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Years ago, it seems like so many years now, I talked with my friend Skip Rappaport as we walked through the woods behind the house he had built on the outskirts of Ann Arbor. On this day, among other things we talked about anthropology, or more to the point how to be an anthropologist. Skip had several pieces of advice culled from his own life and beliefs. The first was that the essence of fieldwork was to follow the ethnography, to be very attuned to what was happening at that historical moment in the lives of the people with whom I was living. Research plans and agendas were less important than letting the ethnography make the ethnographer. In his own life in the field, he and his wife Annie had reached Tsembaga just as they were preparing for the now famous kaiko. So he had written about the ceremonial slaughter of pigs and the elaborate rituals that surrounded their sacrifice. His second piece of advice was to remember that if a writer expected his audience to spend part of their lives reading what he had written, he had an obligation to make the text as crystal and intelligible as his powers would permit him. The highest aim of the writing we call anthropology was to be deep but clear, faithful to the ethnography yet always sensitive to the audience. The writer stood between two sets of subjects, those he had lived with and those he wrote for, and so he had a responsibility to honor himself and his profession by respecting both. By this point in our conversation we had about completed the circuit through the woods. Skip hesitated by the stone steps leading back down into the house and offered a final observation. An observation as much about life as about science. That to be “good”—and I came to know that what he meant by this was to be a good ethnographer and to lead a fulfilling life—it was necessary to resist being buffeted and swayed by all the trends that sweep through the discipline. There was a difference between theoretical trendiness couched in unapproachable language and true depth based on a commitment to revealing the textures and experiences of people’s lives through theory. Theory and ethnography must dance as partners, at times one leading, at other times the other: but always as partners.

I have sought, in this work, to put my friend’s advice into practice. The study centers on the process of the encompassment of the Maring by colonialism, capitalism, and Christianity—what is known as modernity. If there was anything that characterized my stay in the Jimi Valley, it was the
subtle though unrelenting progress of modernity. The reshaping of people’s knowledge, wants, and expectations became inevitable as did the imagination of a new future and an equally new past. This was what was then happening, the work of culture in progress, and this is what now comes to center stage. My earlier study of the Maring, *The Gift of Kinship*, alighted on issues of modernization, but mostly only in passing and where the impact of modernity was transparent and magnified by the situation. Here, the analysis seeks to unearth the multiple levels of change, to confront the encounter between the Maring and the forces of encompassment. It is partly ethnographic, partly historical as it tries to spin out the processes and venues of the encounter. Central to the story is both sides of the story, the engagement of “others” from the perspective of the Westerners as well as the Maring, the vision of the Anglican priest from San Francisco in addition to the shaman from Kompiai. I have tried to let the voices of the station manager from Manchester, the nurse from County Cork, and the other Westerners be heard—to see the struggles alongside and in relation to the Maring. Theoretically, I am concerned less with the overt aspects of modernity—the building of a road, the advent of Western money, the physical presence of the Anglican mission—than the transformation of people’s categories of knowledge and the structure of desire. My view is that these transformations are the most telling because they are generative. Changes in epistemology and desire are an engine that motivates other changes that in turn feed back on itself and motivates still further changes. Encompassment sets a dialectic in train, a new type of history is born, with a different trajectory, and surely a new direction to the Maring’s story of themselves, a new myth of what it means to be a person and have a peoplehood.

Though the book is full of theory and method, I have tried to the best of my ability to write in everyday English, as it were, to tell the story of the Maring’s adventure of the modern. My quest for simplicity of style should not be read as an effort to eschew theory. No, the web of issues defining the encompassment of Melanesia pushes anthropological theory to its limits, and so this is no simple descriptive journey. My argument is that for an account to be adequate to its object it must grasp the changes in the nature of knowledge and desire wrought by colonialism, capitalism, and Christianity. My argument is that for an account of the changes in knowledge and desire to be adequate to its object, it must focus on the encounter between the Maring and their others. And this encounter must not be thought of in terms of domination and resistance, however appealing this may be to our political sensibilities, but in terms of mediation and engagement. Capitalism is so much less an economic machine of domination than a means of seducing the senses, a carnival of goods, an image of the future, a call to arms for the younger generation, a license to express socially pro-
hibited and repressed desires, the cultivation of a world of endless wants, endlessly fulfilled. Especially in the hinterlands of the Highlands, the power of capitalism and commercially driven mass culture derives much less from the coercive power of the state, Christian missions, and big business than from the enchantment of the senses, taste and touch, sight and sound. Finally, the book argues that there can be no theory of transformation without a theory and ethnography of generations, a concept often presupposed in anthropological discourse but rarely spoken about. In an intellectual universe focused on class, gender, and status, generation is the forgotten category. Moreover, theory and ethnography are linked by the fact that it was especially the up-and-coming generation of Maring that was eager for change, ready to embrace the new forms of value creation, new technologies of power, and ultimately new ways of being a person.

Each of these chapters advances these arguments across a variety of dimensions, from a number of angles. I imagine the chapters as a set of transparencies that, when laid one over the other, reveals a new and fuller picture. When I think that speed and information, especially snappy, predigested information, are the ecstasy of the modern age—a thought that inspires the kind of disenchantment that produces ethnographers—I remember what my friend Skip also told me on that day through the woods: that good ethnographers are slow, they take their time to think and write, and hopefully they will age like the '82 Cheval Blanc that we drank later that night.
(More than) Acknowledgments

Writing, and writing ethnography, are conversations that authors have with themselves about where they have been, who they have encountered, and what they have read. As such, writing is the site of so many reasons and relationships, memories and motives, that as I acknowledge those who have made this work with me, I am uncertain of what they have contributed even as I am certain that without them the work and its author would look very different. No doubt less. Much less. For it is only in the presence of others that we are able to uproot words from silence.

Though ethnography and writing have a tone of singularity, they are inherently collaborative and interactive—the ensemble of others, friends, colleagues, informants, that we incorporate within our bodies as dispositions to think certain thoughts and entertain certain reactions to the world. The focus of this book, the encompassment of others, grows out of more than a decade of association with the Social Theory Group, launched by the Center for Transnational Studies. The group introduced me to the critical theorization of the West in ways that allowed me to grasp the agents and institutions of encompassment better than I ever would been able otherwise. I would particularly like to thank Benjamin Lee and Moishe Postone who have been great interlocutors, and even better friends. From an ethnographic angle, I owe an enormous debt to Skip Rappaport and Cherry Lowman. Like poets of the field, they allowed me to apprehend the miracle of the concrete and also to find the spiritual undertow in the simplest fact. They taught me that the language of good ethnography honored its complexities, but was also direct and devoid of jargon. An ethnography should not be a menagerie of theoretical terms that, like circus animals that have forgotten their tricks, seem to shoot off in all directions at once. For this, I am grateful now and for all the sentences to come.

For all of my life, before I knew that anthropology existed, I read and wrote poetry. Some of my heroes are Wallace Stevens, Cesare Pavese, Pablo Neruda, and Octavio Paz: Stevens because he has more to say about ethnography and descriptions than all the books on methodology combined; Pavese because he understood that great cultural processes are manifest in specific instances and locales, as his beautiful realism of life in a small Calabrian village reveals; Neruda and Paz because each in his own
way had such a concern for his homeland that he wrote passionately about
the process by which the West encompasses others and its reverberations.

I also wish to thank Andrew Strathern, Pamela Stewart, and Viviana
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did so with a humor so scintillating that it still brings a smile to my face.

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