

Notes on Generative Anthropology: Towards an Ethics of the Hypothesis

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1. Eric Gans, the Hypothesis, and the Humanities

Scholars in the human sciences (the arts, liberal thought, and the *verstehen* varieties of social sciences) are often called upon to supply new modes of thinking to meet the challenges of a post-Marxist, post-modern, even post-humanist world. A new cartography of methodological expectations and possibilities within the purview of these human sciences would now appear desirable. Never has the world of thought-about-thought been required to perform so much, and only rarely, regrettably, has it offered so little. An interesting exception to this is formed by a small group of thinkers inspired by the writing of René Girard and, among these, especially the author of *Signs of Paradox*, Eric Gans. At the outset of that work, drawing together threads of previous books and articles in the field of generative anthropology, Gans himself reflects on the humanities in the following way:

At the origin, language coincides with the human reality to which it refers because it undecidably generates this reality and is generated by it. The originary hypothesis that is the foundation of generative anthropology is the first rigorous theorization of this originary moment, the common basis of both the humanities and the social sciences. (3)

At one level the observation on disciplines may appear banal: what else, after all, would the human sciences be about? Perhaps one might venture that scholars in the humanities intermittently need reminding of this fact. But there is also a claim that the human itself has a definable and describable genesis, capable of being thought within the disciplinary matrix of the humanities. That is, for Gans, the origin

and definition of what it actually is to be human centers on the moment language itself comes into being. By the standards of contemporary cultural theory it is a breathtaking hypothesis, one whose very boldness raises questions about the possibility of the hypothesis as such on the one hand, and what we colloquially might call its ethico-political dimensions on the other.

For some, the very attempt to theorize at this level of generality is out of step with the times, and affronts current intellectual habits. The boldness *itself*, however, has to do with both methodology and claims made. Each of these is enmeshed with a renewal of the form and promise of the hypothesis. Although not an explicit resource, in one sense the methodological dimension of Gans could be seen to stand in the tradition of the Husserlian reduction (and the Derridean deconstruction). The pursuit of the “scene of the human” is, if anything, a grander project than Husserl’s transcendental pursuit of eidetic objects, as in the important fragment titled “The Origin of Geometry.” More critically, the “tradition” exists as an underestimated influence of Husserl’s “reductive” method in Derrida’s own initial conceptions of deconstruction. A nascent form of deconstruction appears in an unstated form even in the book-length work about Husserl’s essay. In this work, and in *Of Grammatology*, the reduction appears within a negative, even prohibitional, idiom (whereby deconstruction pursues *without anticipation of adequation* the most irreducible moment or event or scene). The “reduction” reappears in Gans, especially in the *Origin of Language* and *Signs of Paradox*. In the process, though, a further shift of focus occurs: the Gansian version of analysis offers the promise of a hypothetical movement beyond, to a scene of “origin.”

The Husserlian provenance enables us to see the Gansian and Derridean analyses as branchings of a similar “methodological” tree, but with very different trajectories and performances. Indeed, much as Derrida developed his deconstructionist approach out of a critique of Husserl’s “Origin of Geometry,” a parallel can be made with the appurtenances, even genesis, of Gans’s own originary hypothesis. For Gans himself, the work of Girard is crucial to this “project.” When we turn back to Girard, however, we find this interesting acknowledgement—and explanation of the significance—of the origin of his variety of analysis. In response to a question as to why he had termed his variety of anthropology a “transcendental anthropology,” he replied

I meant transcendental in the Husserlian sense, because I said at the same time there was an empirical referent. I meant “transcendental” in the sense that there is a relation [between any particular aspect of culture and some original] ritual, however distant. But, since the origin of the ritual has not been witnessed by the people who repeat it, or who manifest its meaning, what I’m talking about is on

another level, a reconstructed level. “Transcendental” refers to that level. I mean “transcendental” in the philosophical and not in the religious sense. (“The Logic of the Undecidable” 15).

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This clearly is the terrain of Gans’s originary hypothesis, and indeed, generative anthropology. The repeated ritual exists as a trace-reminder of a past event; the originary hypothesis is a “reconstruction” directed at understanding the nature, history, and structure of its emergence and ongoing significance.

In welcoming the renewal of this variety of hypothesis, we see a special value and purchase for it within the domain of the human sciences. Beyond the above account, its features are readily described. It is above all *parsimonious*, “minimal” to use Gans’s preferred designation. Second, though, and partly because of this first feature, it is readily graspable and is therefore easily communicated. Whether one designates this as communicative efficacy or epistemological simplicity is a matter of emphasis. What emerges from this second feature of the Gans-style hypothesis is that it is simple enough to afford great explanatory power, or more precisely, *it maximizes explanation relative to the extent of theoretical postulates*. Third, this explanatory force can only happen, however, if the hypothesis is proposed in a certain knowing and above all, *tentative*, idiom. Its explanations will be provisional. But this then leads to the final defining feature of the renewed hypothesis. *It is vulnerable*. As it is simple enough to generate enormous explanation and even greater discussion, it can also be criticized (although we should read this epistemological vulnerability in a certain way, as will be discussed shortly).[\(1\)](#)

This essay, then, is not simply about Gans’s specific hypothesis, but about a new version of the hypothesis *per se*. What follows is gathered by our attempt to explain its nature and to indicate its ethico-political place. We begin, in fact, with Derrida’s insight in *Of Grammatology* that, despite his good intentions, Lévi-Strauss’s rejection of his predecessors was based on participation in ethnocentric and even Romantic conceptions of otherness grounded in Rousseau. Yet Tobin Siebers, in his perceptive work *The Ethics of Criticism*, has shown that in many pragmatic regards, there is little reason to prefer the later account. Clearly some critical facility is needed, especially when Siebers goes on to suggest that Derrida’s reading “over the shoulder of Lévi-Strauss’s shoulder” in the deconstructionist idiom itself leads to Rousseauism. There is, as we shall see, a world of difference between the “first anthropologists [who] placed themselves among ‘primitives’ in a ‘missionary’ capacity” (92), the devout, at least in his belief of the anti-ethnocentrism of his project, but still guilt-ridden Lévi-Strauss (92), and the questionable ethical

dimensions of Derrida's own attack on Lévi-Strauss's double standards (83, 93). This difficult terrain is one we seek less to *resolve* than to view as *the theoretical backdrop* to our own ethically framed proposals.

Siebers is correct in his identification of a half-century of a certain "ethical attempt to prohibit the unjust treatment of other peoples" (92). For us, one of the more striking areas of failure of these attempts (structural anthropology, deconstruction) lies in their procedural operations within a framework of "prohibitory thinking" (cf. 92). Within this context of prohibitionism, Siebers finds deep homologies: Lévi-Strauss prohibits Rousseauism for its attempt at Western self-grounding in an ethical hypothesis of nature (94); Derrida, a "disciple of Rousseau at his most radical" condemns Lévi-Strauss for his false gesture of humility that disavows and yet claims the center (97).

Such ethical prohibitionism appears to be grounded in a chivalric model under whose logics a Western or highly Westernized critic "rescues" a marginalized figure and, thereby, rescues him or herself. In his *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, Girard remarks on the long-standing nature of the tendency:

For about two centuries, the only vigorous bodies of thought have been critical and destructive ones. In my view, the positive common denominator of their efforts was a struggle (though they have never taken it to a conclusion) against mythological thinking; the witness to this has been, first and foremost, what we refer to as the text of persecution . . . What marks our various forms of discourse—even those that appear the most playful and benevolent, or those that like to think of themselves as hardly significant at all—is their radically polemical character. The victims are always there, and everyone is always sharpening his weapon for use against his neighbor in a desperate attempt to win himself somewhere—even if only in an indefinite, Utopian future—a plot of innocence that he can inhabit on his own, or in the company of a regenerate human race. (439-40)

The latest prohibitory form of this long-standing violent intellectuality indicates appurtenances with even earlier moralistic codes of behavior. So perhaps we cannot do otherwise. But we can at least try. In this respect, we can add to Girard's observation the following comments by Serres on the "judgmental" idiom of inquiry that has been the model of humanities scholarship in general. Serres's criticism-about-criticism is that it is very often modeled on juridical idioms, setting itself up as arbiter of propositions:

New things are extraordinarily difficult to invent. If philosophy's worth an hour's work, it's in order to discover these things—or better yet, to invent them—rather than to evaluate what is already being done. Playing is better than blowing the referee's whistle. The philosophies you're talking about [philosophies of suspicion] always place themselves on the side of judgment; thus they make decisions about the truth and clarity of a proposition, about its rationality, its modernity, about its faithfulness to existence. In this, they are academic: they classify and exclude, recognize and note. But it seems to me that the judge's real work or respect for the law lies elsewhere. (136)

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Ensnared in a mode of discourse that is itself simultaneously somewhat juridical and paranoid of judgment, Serres probably overstates the prospect for moving away from habits of judgment, for everyday life calls upon us to do it at each turn. But in our view, there is a need for an emphasis on approaches that are enabling, that afford the possibility of saying new things, of responding in ways that are heuristic and positive. In this respect, the subsequent critic has often been a figure who admonishes, a judge if not a cleric. We are not, in our view, so much “admonishing” or even disputing the earlier writers, as we are seeking a new theatre of conversation, one that occurs in the knowledge of what has gone before, but which does not seek to take place by refutation alone.

Our approach, it is true, would stand in very direct contrast to contemporary practices within the humanities (but not beyond). That is, the current courtroom tendencies lead to complex theoretical edifices on the one hand, or more often, even more complexly “anti-theoretical theory” on the other. Works of the former kind, like the baroque and bizarrely beautiful *Postmodernism: The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* by Fredric Jameson, or of the latter, Derrida's own *Of Grammatology*, may hold our affections as scholars, but seem to have little force in a world they seek, with increasingly complex maneuvers, to explain (in the former case) or refuse to explain (in the latter). One might observe, somewhat controversially with Girard, that “faith in the progress of knowledge has been replaced by faith in the progress of ignorance”; one might also hope then “that this second faith will prove to be as unfounded as the first one was” (“Theory and its Terrors” 236).

If our views are accepted, even provisionally, it is not so much a question of such writers being “wrong” as it is of the need—and desire—for a new theatre of conversation. Writing *after* Lévi-Strauss, Derrida, *after* Jameson, *after* Girard and Gans too for that matter, involves no *requirement* for negating “judgment” and

prohibition. On the contrary, we write in the knowledge of the achievements of these writers. What we call for is a new way of conversing. In this respect, Gans himself has remarked of his “originary hypothesis” that we can

Take one step farther. What I have called the heuristic function of the originary hypothesis may also be put in terms of dialogue: whether or not we agree that it took place or even that it is meaningful to ask the question, the originary event provides us with a minimal subject of conversation. Whatever our skepticism about the event’s historical reality, if we want to speak together as human beings, the principle of parsimony entails that this event is the minimal object on which we can exercise our respective imaginations. (6)

The minimal hypothesis, on the other hand, with tremendous explanatory force and vulnerabilities written across its front door, has in our view an ethico-political value even as an heuristic device that the more cumbersome theories cannot match. This essay, then, is an appeal for a new kind of scholarship, a new kind of “conversation.”

A word on what follows. We open our analysis with two discussions of the discipline of anthropology. The first discussion sketches: an inter-relationship between the originary hypothesis we find in all of Gans’s work since the *Origin of Language*; the possibilities, problems, and prospects of a “secondary” field of hypotheses (outlined in tantalizing detail in the *End of Culture*); and the traditional postmodern critiques of the discipline that have arisen since the mid-eighties. If some of this involves criticism not just of the Cliffordesque tradition, but also of Gans’s own analyses at this point in time, the purpose of this section is to illustrate how, in our view, Gans is right to envision a terrain of originary and secondary hypothesizing. After establishing the nature of the Gansian promise, we then seek to turn these insights upon the writing-work of anthropology itself, the discipline par excellence of disavowal of the center, of emphatic marginality. We do this in a discussion of the scene of the writing lesson in *Of Grammatology*. In addition, we consider a complex join between disciplinarily “traditional” (albeit narrowly-defined and conventionally understood) anthropology, its structuralist critique and development, Derridean deconstruction, and Gansian generative anthropology. Expanding upon the communicational and ethical dimensions of this “scene,” we explore the issue of the scene itself as a theoretical formation that both links and distinguishes the works of Gans and Girard on the one hand, and Derrida on the other. From this discussion, we take up key “scenes” and “hypotheses” as they are handled by Gans, especially the work on mimesis, language, and the human. We conclude with some observations on the orthodox dread of hypothesizing, of the possibility of knowing,

or even of straying beyond certain protocols of language.

2. Anthropology as Discipline

One year after the death of the great collaborator, Frederick Engels wrote and published his best known work, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and State* (1884). But it is not the thought of the great critic and comrade that pervades this work. Instead, it is that of the all-but-forgotten anthropologist Lewis Morgan whose studies in anthropology and the ethnographic recording of other cultures form the basis of Engels' incisive slice through civilization and capitalism in that book-length essay. So taken with Morgan's work is Engels that he actually concludes with "Morgan's verdict on civilization":

Since the advent of civilization, the outgrowth of property has been so immense, its forms so diversified, its uses so expanding, and its management so intelligent in the interests of its owners that it has become, on the part of the people, an unmanageable power. The human mind stands bewildered in the presence of its own creation. (cited by Engels 334)

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As we stand in the confusing proliferation of cultural and social formations, there is no disputing the need for study. Morgan is right to acknowledge this bewilderment, and in many regards his discipline's highest promise was the systematic understanding of the criss-crossing of who and what we are, whence we came, and perhaps where we might one day be going. Beyond these "Enlightenment" sorts of claims, the discipline finds its deepest realization in projects like Engels', where, on the basis of its learning, prospects for political and economic justice are outlined. Small wonder then that the work of anthropology is useful to both critical and speculative thought, no matter which culture we stand within.

But we must proceed carefully now, as we seek not to be restricted by a still newer wave of anthropological auto-critique. We too must view anthropology in its contexts of emergence: that is, we too can say that it was framed and engendered by an imperial order, and that Lewis Morgan was part of this context. Augmenting the early historical legacy was the ongoing practice of twentieth century anthropology-as-discipline that in its ever more specialized incarnations produced "alterity expertise" in the name of science. This clearly cannot stand. Nor did it. By the mid-eighties, writers like James Clifford applied post-structural critiques to the issues of knowledge and discipline to such an extent that every story was seen as partial, every knowledge as limited.

Taken at the letter, this self-proscription in retrospect seems absurd, an Inquisition-like farce of textual protocols, preventing *any* kind of effective criticism (the work of Engels, for instance, would have been impossible in such a terrain). So in many ways it was. Perhaps, though, we need to remember the wellspring of the objection before condemning the condemnation. Even before the chic Clifford “classic-postmodern” version of anthropology, we had plain objections like this appearing:

During the four years in which I have lived among many anthropologists, I have seen very clearly that in reality they use the information they collect from us to write books and in this way achieve fame and money. They have made us the objects of their studies, but we cannot share in the results. They generally look upon us as the informants and nothing more . . . anthropology is very limited in its understanding of our world. Whilst we indigenous peoples are not ourselves studying our past and becoming conscious of our social and cultural situation . . . then anthropology will give a false, at times even ridiculous, impression of us (Jiménez, 71-2)

Note the ingredients here: *first*, the anthropologists are emissaries of a cultural formation that does not respect the people they study; *second*, they travel among marginal peoples in order to produce foundational works for their own cultures; *third*, their works do not usually help the peoples studied; *fourth*, their works are usually factually wrong. We will shortly consider these remarks, both in relation to the discipline (this section) and in relation to the constitution of epistemological fields (next section).

The very first thing we need to do is note a schism between this variety of postcolonial writing and that of the Clifford-style anthropologists. Where Clifford will insist that all knowledges are partial, limited, and, in the case of Western writing, ethnocentric, Jiménez, on the contrary, insists that there is such a thing as a “false” account, and by implication, therefore, the possibility of a “true” account. For those who have been oppressed by others (Western or otherwise), there is no doubt about the positive fact of the oppression, the deceitfulness or stupidity of the misrepresentations, and so on. In the upside down world of postcolonial studies, it seems, the only place to find attempts to record positive cultural accounts is in the realm of the ex-colonized. We can be quite sure that whenever we encounter monikers like “partial knowledge,” “decentring,” or even “ethnocentrism” we have patronage under a new name. That is, the disavowing performance comes from the same Western center that produced the original oppression. The most unfortunate consequence of this self-sanctifying dance of disavowal is that the very possibility of talking about material cultural form and transformation in cultures other than one’s

own has receded. In tandem with this, in an age of profound migration and transformation, we witness the retreat of humanities and social science scholars from anything that might be seen as an “other.” The possibility that hypotheses can as a matter of course be respectfully ventured in a pluralistic academy, cross-argued and thought through, seems to have been replaced by elaborate protocols of self-abnegation and sterilization lest anything of import be said.

There were of course clear historical reasons for the conceptual “retreat.” It bears saying that we do not wish to throw the achievements of “postmodern anthropology” out with the bathwater of its rule-driven axiomatics and prohibition. Some time ago, we read with great amusement Terry Eagleton’s furious attack on Gayatri Spivak and postcolonial writing in general. We certainly agree with him that much “postmodern” and “postcolonial” writing comprises a “flamboyant theoretical avant-gardism [that conceals] a rather modest political agenda” (4). The same of course can be said for much of his own Marxist theory. But in both his and the case he describes, we would prefer to *situate* rather than *eliminate* these important moments in cultural theory. For us, be it Spivak and Bhabha or Clifford and Johannes Fabian, we find valuable critiques of practice. And returning to the above cited passage which precedes the advent of postmodern anthropology as such, we do not have to deny the possibility of cultural exchange and commentary to make this very basic observation about Jiménez’s remarks: every one of his objections to anthropology-as-practiced has a particular historical validity. Today, within a Hellenic-style imperium dominated by the modern democratic Alexander, there remain broad structural impediments to scholarly reciprocities (the difference between a Fijian studying the behavior of stockbrokers and a New Yorker doing fieldwork in Kadavu). But these are not insurmountable, especially if-in light of the above-the study is conducted within the purview of a critical framework, if the marginal work is understood as epistemological in character, if the results are shared, and if there are sufficient local anthropologists to generate self-knowledges that can be tallied with the outsiders’ claims.

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In the welter of self-condemnation and apparent disavowal, a series of remarkable achievements have been eclipsed, and could even be lost. Let us note these achievements. *First*, the mono-discourse of the Anglo-American academy has been pluralized. Writers like Homi Bhabha are as important as writers like Fredric Jameson, and even if Bhabha has made a science of writing from the margins, this does *not* mean that he is a marginal writer. *Second*, there are now indigenous and local anthropologists; anthropological knowledge is not ridiculous and wrong (and any European who produces a text filled with errors will discover this sooner rather than later). *Third*, the ground and need for a philosophically “secondary”

anthropology based upon something like an “originary” field of hypothesis and thence axiom-devising generative anthropology is now clear. But this latter field still hangs in the balance, and awaits its fullest potentials.

Now all these positive transformations are actually weakened by a claim based tenuously in postmodern thought that all cultures exist somehow on the same level, that there are no grounds for comparative understanding. We wish to illustrate this claim by looking first at the possibility of an “Engels today,” before taking up the most problematic of Gans’s own texts to explain where we stand. We begin with Engels. Let us imagine that Morgan had situated his work and culture vis-à-vis those he studied, that he had a clear sense of how his marginality was significant to the European center, that he worked not just for Britain, but also for those he studied. And let us imagine a modern-day Engels taking up this work, and using it to think about the historical genesis of the family, its role in a swath of world history, its ongoing role in contemporary analogues as well as *and especially* in his own society. Surely this project would be as valuable today as it was when it was first generated. Even if Morgan’s work was flawed, Engels’ analysis was used by colonized peoples themselves to dream of social and economic change; it is a historical fact that Marxism—that Western thing—did reach across the divides, and it did so at least partly because of its ability to think about and beyond the hegemonic culture, to think in terms of this culture’s genesis, and to think of other systems of distribution and knowing. Thus we can say with confidence that the potential for an anthropology grounded in reciprocities of knowledge as well as in a speculative order of history such as that which Engels (and even Morgan himself) deployed is conceivable. And if we would have questioned even *and especially* in its time the absurdities of the Marxist utopias and futures, we would still accept the value of their *empirical* and *communicational ethics* of provisionality; these values would appear to us to be obvious. For this reason, Marx and Engels themselves were, in our view, generative anthropologists. Marx’s more systematic reflections on philosophy and political economy—contained, for instance, in works like *Toward a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* and *The German Ideology*—are predicated on a highly specific philosophical anthropology: a materialist ontology of the human as *homo faber*. Not only that, but in their full dimension as writers, their generative anthropological aspect remains the only noteworthy feature of value in their wide range of social and cultural studies.

This brings us to the *particularities* of the relationship between generative anthropology and the discipline of anthropology (in the next section we discuss the general significance of anthropology-as-avowed-margin-space and its writing practices). To proceed, we wish to take up two works, Johannes Fabian’s *Time and the Other* and Gans’s *End of Culture*. *Time and the Other* attacks the refusal of “coevalness” by Western anthropology. That is, Fabian condemns the tendency to

situate the “primitive” other as the Western self’s historical antecedent (“their present is our past”). He shows how the spatio-temporal displacement worked seamlessly and self-confirmingly for all, and through all, the early anthropologists in whose hands cultural hierarchization occurred in and through totalizing cultural descriptions situated in the bubbles of time and space. For Fabian, neither “political Space, nor political Time” are “natural resources” (144). Fabian singles out for special treatment the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss whose taxonomies of culture would seem to avoid this charge. Fabian is strangely insistent that Lévi-Strauss, in his displacement of the category to a taxonomic *spatializing* practice, still predicates selfhood on the other in the same way. For Fabian, Lévi-Strauss is determined to preserve certain anthropological habits, like fieldwork, in order to guarantee a distinction between “the anthropologist [and] the historian” and accomplishing “the scientific feat of reducing that concrete world [of the other] to its most general and universal principles” (61). He concludes that structuralism itself is part of the habit of Western ethnocentric classification, “never . . . just a neutral classificatory act, but a powerful rhetorical figure” (63).

Now despite everything he finds, Fabian tells us he believes the discipline of anthropology will and should continue to exist. But his conception of how it might so exist is very strange. Fabian (like Lévi-Strauss) posits a continuing anthropology, founded on somehow meeting in the “same time.” At first, the aim seems reasonable, even modest. But this idea could be the most colonizing idea of all: it involves flattening out all cultural time for an axiomatic face-to-face that is itself a culture-specific hallucination. And even within that purview (as fiction from Cervantes through Joyce to Robert Dessaix has shown), consciousness and time exist in a complex weave in which the enablement of imaginary meeting points is part and parcel of knowing. This is true even at the most banal level of commentary: how, indeed, can Fabian himself “talk to” Lévi-Strauss’s account when the latter occurred in another cultural framework, answering different critical questions, and so on? Such apparently ridiculous questions pose rather more difficulty for Fabian’s utopianist pronouncements on time and the other. But perhaps the most problematic aspect of the entire work concerns his vision for the future. Fabian’s mystifying final throwaway lines for the future of the discipline would have anthropological theory-work (after Foucault) not just understood, but actually *deployed* as a series of practices that are somehow *operationally* equivalent to the practices of the society or group being engaged. The exchange, he says, will be “frontal,” the “relationships must be on the same plane” (164). Knowledge will no longer entail abstracting our “general knowledge from [their] concrete experience” because in order to claim that a particular social group is the reality and “our conceptualizations the theory, one must keep standing anthropology on its head” (165). In the final sentence of the book, he goes so far as to argue that

Renewed interest in the history of our discipline and disciplined inquiry into the history of confrontation between anthropology and its other are therefore not escapes from empiry [sic]; they are practical and realistic. They are ways to meet the Other on the same ground, in the same Time. (165)

In these pages, Fabian offers anthropology that sort of reflexivity that has become a popular ritual—an anthropology that never leaves the Derrida and Foucault-protected library of evil anthropological white uncles and aunts, Malinowski, Mead, Lévi-Strauss et al.

Gans clearly occupies an unpopular position in relation to these serried ranks of librarian-guardians. We wish to take up his most direct (and extreme) form of engagement with this debate in order to show that even if some claims would be better rephrased or qualified, there remains a terrain worthy of hypothesis. In the *End of Culture*, Gans remarks of these habits:

Ethnological humility should not be exaggerated. It is a paltry tribute to human creativity to measure our superiority to stone-age tribes only in technical and military terms, without mentioning the cultural achievement of Western society. But if these achievements are not merely ornamental, they must be in some sense the products of a higher ethic. (146-47)

Given that Gans wrote against the background of debates we have outlined above, these lines seem cavalier. But it does not mean they are wrong. In fact, we can now see that he is right to seek to avoid the reciprocal resentments that characterized these arguments, and his insistence that we need to understand not just technical and military prowess, but also, the astonishing array of Western modernity as a cultural formation is absolutely sustainable.

But this is not all he says. His use of the word “higher” requires a unilineal hierarchy of some sort. When Gans says that they must “in some sense” be “higher,” he is quite explicit in his meaning:

Because social evolution takes place in a universe of competing societies, it may be explained on the basis of the Darwinian “null-hypothesis” of the survival of the fittest. The competitive process forces us to judge societies by economic, and above all, military criteria, for these are the chief modes of competition

among societies. (147)

In this regard, it bears noting that he departs from Girard's work, which, in its more explicitly Christian framing, is preferable. This part of the *End of Culture*, like many of the tutor-texts of Derrida's (which purport to operate within the secular realm but lapse into theologism) seeks to make its arguments on secular and philosophical terrain. Unlike many such texts, of course, Gans has framed his analyses as minimal hypotheses, and if all he were saying had to do with the fact of one culture's survival "after" another, a relation of temporal subsequence (with all the issues that might involve), the Darwinian aspect would not attract our attention in this way. But for us the fact of survival does not "explain" anything other than the ability to survive. Gans's deployment of the Darwinian "null hypothesis" in this instance entails considerable equivocation of the term "success" which permits something of a conflation of one pole of its etymological meaning (temporal succession) with the pole concerned with the evaluation of moral perspicacity. Of course, the problem is not that this case cannot be made for the ethical desirability of a certain Judeo-Christian ethic (however much the Roman Empire evinced-or failed to evince-this ethic)-nor is it a position that the authors necessarily disavow. It's simply that "survival of the fittest" does not provide the intellectual resources for such an assertion. The conceptual repertoire to which Gans has availed himself here will not supply the axiological schema he desires without some enormous metaphorical displacement. It's not that the two senses (of ethical and evolutionary "success") fail to exhibit a perfectly isomorphic relationship-that the movement between senses is a too pronounced for a "useful" equivocation; nor is it necessarily that this equivocation is not signaled by Gans. It's that these two senses of "success," in many important respects, *are actually the inverse of each other*. A central problem with any account for cultural change via a recourse to underspecified notions of the "survival of the fittest" is that cultures themselves unfailingly break the most fundamental law of genetics: that acquired characteristics cannot be inherited.(2)

Ultimately, though, we believe that elsewhere in Gans's own work (even elsewhere in this very book) we find the best rejoinder to the position he proposes at this point. For us, the Gansian hypothesis is always plural. That is, sites of cultural emergence are always scenic, *and hence plural*. No sense can be made of Greek geometrical achievement *without the backdrop of the achievement itself*: the previous Egyptian mathematics, the Babylonians, and so on. For us, at this secondary level of speculation, the counter-hypothesis would concern the radical imbrication of cultures. In the world today there are no cultures that exist in discontinuity with others. This includes what might best be called the "modern primitive" societies (the first adjective alerts us to the fact that the second is a deeply *modern* value). So when he says that there exist "today groups of men

whose culture has progressed little since Palaeolithic times" (146), we see no reason to concur (and this from experience). But the claim is linked to the Darwinian "null hypothesis" cited above. In this scheme of things, Gans adds his own unique twist, by displacing the development to the field of ethics; thus, "ethical evolution is the most fundamental, most nearly continuous factor in social evolution" (148). It also bears saying, that one has to wonder what happened to those "chief modes of competition" of "social evolution": "economic, and above all, military criteria" (*The End of Culture* 147). Then, when Gans goes on to suggest that Rome "finally succumbed to more primitive competition because it lacked competition on its own level" (148), he seems to be moving to admit a notion of radical cultural plurality. But this too is overarched by the wider ethical progress that he argues in any event took place.(3)

7

Now if we have questioned the mix of Darwin and ethics, seeking instead other bases for hypothesizing, the situation is a little different with Gans's attempts to explain the Western self. We are relegating rather than denying the value of such hypotheses entirely: we agree that there *is* a place for an inquiry into the West on its own terms or, put differently, a tracing of emergence of "our values from others." But this would be a parochial variety of analysis, even in this spectacular case. A far more difficult variety of analysis has to do with radical plurality, such that when a scene is sketched historically, the principal work involves the *outlining of backgrounds, what Gans calls scenes*. Anthropologists, like philosophers, have always underestimated how much culture travels, and how ingenious our ancestors were in their travels. If Gans is right to suggest that the current "one world imbrication" is unprecedented, the phenomenon of imbricated worlds is the way the world has always been. Where some, like Derrida, see this always already plural structure as the endpoint of a deconstruction, however, we believe on the contrary that this is no more than a beginning.

This, we believe, is what the Gansian *a posteriori* variety of secondary hypotheses could offer. And this is why, even if we disagree with Gans's estimation of the state of cultures today or in times past (a question of anthropology in the limited sense), we nevertheless find common cause with this framing of the *level* of the inquiry.(4) That is, like Gans's version of the field, "our" anthropology would ask: against which specific scene did this representational schema emerge? Where did this ethics, *utterly* new under the sun (new precisely by virtue of its *relationship* to all that stands around it, before it, after it) come from? When, like Girard, Gans insists that culture itself is "primarily not a celebration of order but a response to disorder" (26), we get the wellspring of a general form of historical hypothesizing.

So there still remains the need for something like a *positive* grammatology, much of which—we contend—would be consistent with what Gans has called generative anthropology. That is, we seek a terrain for communicational hypothesis that can offer minimal scenes for analysis. In seeking this, some might fear the resurgence of an old ethnocentrism. But this need not be so. We have seen that even under the British imperial formation, the works of anthropologists like Morgan and others were deployed by Frederick Engels in an effort to explain and to change the world. Gans may not appear a likely successor to writers like Engels or Nietzsche. In our view, however, the unstated principle that guides the communicational ethics we have been outlining for the vulnerable and parsimonious Gansian hypothesis in the applied field of anthropology-as-discipline is simple: let us better understand Morgan's "bewildering" world (be it of property-rights or whichever general inquiry) and thereby make it a better place for all of its inhabitants.

3. Margin Work: The Meaning of Anthropological Writing

Anthropologists have, as we have seen, been themselves the subject of anthropological scrutiny. Jiménez's angry remark that "During the four years in which I have lived among many anthropologists, I have seen very clearly that in reality they use the information they collect from us to write books and in this way achieve fame and money. They have made us the objects of their studies, but we cannot share in the results" (71). The claim may appear far-fetched. What is the nature of the fame that an anthropological hack-writer can glean from the presentation of a paper at a conference of peers? What is the money that attaches to an academic position in the face of the triumphs of sports stars (or internet whiz-kids for that matter)? On this level, the fear is misplaced. And yet, the experience of being studied is part of a very serious and much more insidious process than these objections can counter. It has to do with the nature and meaning of marginality itself.

In this regard, even after all the critiques, we still must pose a very difficult question: can we do *other* than think from the margins? Derrida is surely more correct than even he realized when, in that extraordinary meditation on presence and the ear, the essay on the "Tympan" which opens the collection titled *Margins of Philosophy*, he takes up the very issue of making (philosophical) sense:

Gnawing away at the border which should make this question into a particular case, they are to blur the line which separates a text from its controlled margin. They interrogate philosophy beyond its meaning, treating it not only as a discourse but as a determined text inscribed in a general text, enclosed in the representation of its own margin. Which compels us not only to reckon with the

entire logic of the margin, but also to take an entirely other reckoning; which is doubtless to recall that beyond the philosophical text there is not a blank, virgin, empty margin, but another text . . . (xxiii)

If making sense is always at the price of the marginalized other—including those replete texts of the margins always treated as if blank and yet themselves the actual condition of the supposedly mainstream sense—then the idea emerges that the margin is nearly always constitutive of the center.

8

Perhaps these thoughts about the margin are not as controversial as they seemed when they first appeared. In the strangely errant criss-crossings of the works of Girard, Derrida, and Gans, the role of marginality is a recurring theoretical motif. The major thing that joins Derrida's analysis with the work of Gans and Girard is the idea that the marginalized, the excluded, and the periphery are *actual conditions of sense*. In each of the three writers' work, a scene of representation is at stake. Gans, following Girard, sees it as no less than the exigent co-occurrence of the origin of the human and of language. Derrida calls it writing-in-general, *arche-writing*. The treatments are not identical, of course, and neither are they directed to equivalent ends. But all see a link between violence and its relationship to representation.⁽⁵⁾ Even for Derrida, writing at its most irreducible (which includes oral systems of proper names and kinship) is linked to violence. For all three writers, this violence isn't derivative, but is constitutive of the whole scene. And this is why it is not just anthropology-the-discipline that we must cover, but its inherited conception of writing.

So it is that we begin with writing and other lessons. Claude Lévi-Strauss's account of the Nambikwara comprises a series of meditations that emerge out of reflections on South American antiquity. His "Writing Lesson" is a poignant description of the exchange of values and the relations of power between a European colonial culture and a South American indigenous one. The account of the Nambikwara chief seeking to imitate the anthropologist's writing activity depicts a scene in which the knowing European seeks, for reasons of sensitivity, not to offend his counterpart:

I handed out sheets of paper and pencils. At first they did nothing with them, then one day I saw that they were all busy drawing wavy horizontal lines. I wondered what they were trying to do, then it was suddenly borne upon me that they were writing, or to be more accurate, were trying to use their pencils in the same way as I did mine . . . The majority did this, and no more, but the chief had further ambitions. No doubt he was the only one who had grasped the purpose

of writing. So he called for a writing pad, and when we both had one, and were working together, if I asked for information on a given point, he did not supply it verbally but drew wavy lines on his paper and presented them to me, as if I could read his reply. He was half taken in by his own make-believe; each time he completed a line, he examined it anxiously as if expecting the meaning to leap from the page, and the same look of disappointment came over his face. But he never admitted this, and there was a tacit understanding between us to the effect that his unintelligible scribbling had a meaning which I pretended to decipher. (388)

To start with, could Lévi-Strauss and Derrida both have missed something here?[\(6\)](#) It seems unlikely from the account itself. But let us recall the logics of this scene-as-writing. To start with, the account was written by the anthropologist. And if we recall that the anthropologist was himself disturbed by what he had instigated, perhaps he missed the possibility that the chief was himself playing a joke of his own, leading the anthropologist on. Irrespective of this particular case, the double possibility in this scene is a common one: the foreign and empowered anthropologist takes earnest notes on a scene (or asks questions) that provoke that variety of resisting humor that is grounded in resentment of an occupying force.

But let us imagine that Lévi-Strauss's account is modally correct. Anyone reading this passage can feel the uneasiness permeating the writing. The deception being perpetrated is but one aspect of the imbalance in relations of power and understanding. If the overt level of Lévi-Strauss's text documents his fear that a wonderful oral culture was fading before his eyes, there are other, deeper anxieties here at work. But let us begin with what the words tell us. That is, by Lévi-Strauss's overt account, the writing lesson is evidence of a tragic passage and a record of a loss. Already, then, two levels of writing lesson are emerging clearly. The first is the lesson to the chief given by the anthropologist. The second is the lesson to the West that Lévi-Strauss feels his lesson teaches him. But this then leads to a third lesson, the one Derrida wants to teach us, using Lévi-Strauss's own account. This lesson is different in kind from the first two. Applying, indeed, to an extent actually devising, the strategy of deconstruction, he argues that far from Lévi-Strauss mounting an effective critique of Western influence, instead, he was in these "in many respects remarkable; very fine pages" (103) actually complicit with and part of a wider Western ethnocentrism which always reads its others as "nature," so as to efface its own hegemonic assertion of selfhood. So an "epistemological phonologism" based upon a linguistic and metaphysical phonologism is as much at work in Lévi-Strauss as it was in those he appeared to criticize. The "deconstruction" which, in the preceding discussion of Saussure, appears initially as a revealing of tension between stated intent and what is done is therefore applicable to Lévi-Strauss,

despite the writer's apparent and oft-stated good intentions. *This* writing lesson needs little qualification: ethnocentrism—even blatant racism—is often embedded in discourse, no matter what the intentions of the writers. The further lesson Derrida proffers, that the priority given to voice-based significance by Lévi-Strauss can be displaced, is useful as far as it goes. The graphic systems Derrida gleans from the account given by Lévi-Strauss can be shown to be more originary than the speech Lévi-Strauss goes on to posit as pure presence. Perhaps Derrida's own unstated axiom is that any claim of communicational adequation would lapse into metaphysical logocentrism or even theology. We do not know, for the trajectory of the inquiry entails the inhabiting and interrogation of texts like Lévi-Strauss's which participate in the hierarchy of subordination implicit in Western thought.

9

Now Derrida's contribution to this field is obviously important for another reason. His *Grammatology* is unique for its treatment of anthropology as part and parcel of a wider philosophical formation (rather, than as is usually the case, an attempt by writers critical of anthropology to draw in links to philosophical frameworks). For, as works like David Goldberg's *Racist Culture* have repeatedly pointed out, there is a join between disciplines like anthropology and "Western" knowledge itself. The difference is that Derrida is one of the few writers in the philosophical tradition to take the work of mainstream anthropology seriously enough to use it as a theoretico-critical lynchpin. But as Gans and Girard have repeatedly pointed out, we need to be wary of any writing that claims the space of the margins. This is not a comment on Derrida in particular. He, after all, is the one who showed that, in the case of Lévi-Strauss, a knight-advocate of the margins can actually, by all his chivalric codes, be a self-serving, even if at time unwitting, representative of the realm.

What is at stake is something wider. Perhaps the very process of knowing is a simultaneous act of *pretending* or somehow *staging* margins in order to repeatedly define new centers (what were structuralism and deconstruction if not formations of the center?). The margins are important for good and obvious reasons. For as John Romm's wonderful little book on the interrelationship of ancient Greek speculative geography, fiction, and knowledge, *The Edges of the Earth in Ancient Thought* remarks:

Perhaps the most fundamental act by which the archaic Greeks defined their world was to give it boundaries, marking off a finite stretch of earth from the otherwise formless expanse surrounding it. Without such boundaries both land and sea would become *apeiron*, boundless . . . The epithet attests to the

cognitive discomfort which an unlimited extent of space could inspire . . . the word implies a formlessness and diffusion that are the enemies of order and hierarchy. The “boundless” earth therefore had to be given boundaries before it could be made intelligible. (10-11)

In this work, Romm shows how a variety of textual genres (from geography to fictional fantasy) produced a stable sense of center by positing outlandish and extraordinary other-worldly margins in the fast flowing River of Ocean in which it was held that islands of paradise and other non-quotidian anti-realities “existed.” Physical space sufficed to hold everything from antichthon with counter-balancing continents and all the assorted flora and fauna of nightmare and fantasy alike. Sometimes—as with Plato’s Atlantis—the spatial displacement occurred in tandem with a displacement in time (a golden age, when soils, and the peoples who lived on them, were contrastively better). These were *imagined physical displacements* and as such, they allowed this thought to take place.

But where do we find ourselves now? Are we not far from anthropology, the discipline?

We are. We will not even speculate about a join between the ancient Greek conception of “anthropology” and more modern and Western notions. And yet Romm’s words offer us this challenge: what are the distinct spatial and temporal displacements of anthropology, how have they worked, and how are we to view them in relation to generative anthropology? Romm suggests that only by defining the “edges” of what we call “our” world can we be sure about what we think are our “centers.” Let us look again at what anthropologists *do*. Let us recall the specter of Malinowski in his tent in PNG. What is he actually *doing* there? Or Lévi-Strauss, the savior, in South American hinterlands—what is *he* doing? They are doing margin-work, they are *literally drawing the boundaries Romm described*.

Their margin-work has to do with the knowledge-system. That is, while they produce texts about and from margins, their work is actually *constitutive* of the center. But is Derrida exempt from this? What is *he* doing? On one level, of course, he is simply doing the same thing as we are: he seeks to show the importance of the margin. But this is not all he is doing. In the account of the Nambikwara, Derrida seems to write about writing; in the book bearing the title *Margins of Philosophy*, Derrida’s margins often seem to concern the edges of pages or the footnotes to texts. But very few have missed the applicability to the theatres of alienation and marginalization more generally. Lest the point be missed by dint of sheer obviousness: Malinowski, Lévi-Strauss, and Derrida were not just important thinkers in their time, but were (for want of a better word) utterly paradigmatic thinkers of

their respective times and sites. In this regard, Gans and Girard have a somewhat different status. Yet perhaps what makes Gans and Girard threatening is their *direct thematisation* of the marginal as the privileged route to knowledge (an inversion of the archetypal Whiggish view of history) in a (post) Christian culture. But their modes of expressing this are not isomorphic to the contents they theorize: although both are marginal, neither offers their own subject position as corroborating the veracity of their thinking. That is, they refuse a central, if implicit, imperative: It is not enough to analyze the margins: we are supposed to pretend to that same very status "ourselves." All this marks generative and fundamental anthropology off from most of their antecedents, including structural anthropology and deconstruction. But it does not yet let us see how it relates to "traditional" anthropological margin-work as such.

10

Let us try to draw these two discussions of anthropology to a close. We have explored the link between generative anthropology and anthropology in particular on the one hand, and the way this relates to general issues of marginality on the other. We saw to start with that, in *Time and the Other*, Fabian has raised valid issues that go to the heart of anthropological hypothesizing. Yet we also found that the response from generative anthropological inquiry called for a new, and less judicial idiom of assessment: in this regard, there is nothing whatsoever wrong with an inquiry into the genesis of one's own socio-cultural ethical formation so long as that inquiry does not think it is the only one worthy of pursuit under the sun. And we have seen that in the chain of negations from Rousseau onwards, there is no privileged place to stand. In fact, the principle of theoretical coeval moralizing, or even of the Derridean trace (or whichever device) does not guarantee writerly ethics any more than Rousseau's or Lévi-Strauss's good intentions did. Deconstruction, one angry respondent pointed out to one of us in a "third world" context, like structural anthropology, could in certain hands be another tool of colonial disempowerment, bamboozlement, and sophistry, just as surely as semiotics or even in his time the functionalist Malinowski inscriber of the Trobriands. In this regard, there is little to divide the practitioners of postmodern anthropology from those of structural anthropology, or we might allow in advance, generative anthropology.

But we believe we have also found that the development of hypotheses of this Gansian kind is far more courageous and useful an activity than the fence-building work of postmodern anthropology. That is, whatever its merits (and we have seen many), texts like Fabian's not only works to prohibit the conceptual apparatuses of the bad old discipline, but also, they attack *any* sort of positive or generalizing inquiry, including presumably, generative anthropology. And this brings us to the

more general formation of hypotheses. In privileging epistemological proscription over prescription, Fabian participates in a certain mob heuristic whose mode has been well captured by Girard:

. . . the most unavoidable process of abstraction, the very type of generalization that makes you able to walk into the street without being run over by a car, is already tainted with the impurity of reductionism. You are a “reductionist” above all if you pursue the type of goal that any researcher outside the Humanities takes for granted that he should pursue. (“Origins” 31)

In fact, if Fabian never quite allows himself to say the words, the idea that new learning could take place seems to have evaporated, for there is *nothing at all* written to guide the anthropologist seeking to engage in a fieldwork practice that occurred “coevally”—that is, in the same time, frontally. He carefully avoids any kind of claim to positive information on the one hand and, like so many other writers on the topic, he conflates and rejects categories of generality and universality. But can Fabian do these things? For things *do* happen in the world; they happen all the time, little banal ordinary things—like our lives—that are in every sense of the word “positive.” To contend otherwise is probably ridiculous. It is, of course true that there are worthy questions and problems of description and explanation, but this does not mean that the things and events don’t exist, still less that work on actual practices should simply be proscribed because it is informed by a guiding or even provisionally totalizing theoretical orientation. For us, on the contrary, when Fabian like so many others, lashes out at any effort to abstract general information from concrete experience, he stands on extremely vulnerable ground (164); apart from anything else, the directive to eschew generality is a general imperative of the most restrictive kind. The movement from concrete particulars to more general levels is an extremely valuable and powerful process, and is one hardly confined to anthropology or the university. While generalizing can (and historically has) been associated with universalizing tendencies (the view that this is the way it always has and ought to have been), it need not be so, and often is not so. We would contend, as Gans contends when he thinks about what language itself *is* in *Signs of Paradox*, that not only is language a positive existent, but also, there is no society on earth that does not deploy generalizing tendencies, for these are the grounds of *any* kind of collective knowability.

* * *

We have engaged with anthropology-as-discipline in order to indicate how, on the one hand, this most problematically ethnocentric and racially grounded discipline in history has like all fields of knowledge disavowed the center, finding (a) “true self”

in the margins. In the same movement, however, we have suggested that it can be linked with wider philosophical tendencies that include most obviously the imbricated fields of structuralism and deconstruction. Ironically, then, Girard and Gans stand provisionally aside from these problems mainly because they see the fold of marginality itself as constitutive of thought, as its *founding* condition. But when we see writers like Fabian not only venturing the auto-critique of the ethnocentrism of anthropology, but also in their practice denying any sort of positive or general inquiry, we would like to join, provisionally at least, Gans and Girard on what seems to have become the farthest shore. In the discussions which follow, on the scene and then, its place in relation to the hypothesis, we would like to indicate why we have taken this position.

11

4. The Scene, the Hypothesis and “Positive” Knowledge

For us, Gans’s most important contribution to the rethinking of the hypothesis lies in the way he thinks about the scene. We have seen already that he believes there are different orders of hypothesis. We have outlined our response to these, and even if we believe aspects of the actual secondary hypothesis need modifying, we have argued that Gans has opened a decisive new vista. The originary hypothetical domain is an anthropology of thought itself: it concerns the inquiry into the very question of what it is to be human. In this terrain, Gans’s most brilliant excursions have actually been proposed by the use of the scene. But if it is still under-theorized, he has also re-opened doors long slammed shut on specific anthropological historicizing by thinking of these as secondary order hypotheses. Without recourse to the scene, we have already tried to indicate how these hypotheses might work, might actually be made operational. But to go any further, we must now take up the question of the scene, its types, and the resultant varieties of hypotheses.

To start with, for Gans, a scene is more important than a theory (*Signs* 6). So it is that we open with an edifice. The “tent” (*skene*) or modest wooden hut from which actors could emerge, defined a backdrop, painted perhaps with an appropriate “scene,” against which the action of the play could take place. “Scene” in English, as in French, has an etymological derivation from ancient Greek, the nature of which the following account makes clear:

The center of it was the *orchestra* (“dancing place”), a circular space . . . Round more than half of the orchestra, forming a kind of horse-shoe, was the *theatron* (“seeing-place”) proper, circular tiers of seats . . . Behind the orchestra and facing the audience was the *skene*, originally a wooden structure, a façade with three

doors, through which, when the drama had developed . . . the actors made their entrances. (Harvey 422-23)

The scene in this picture, *creates* the three dimensional space before it. It is one of those curious ironies of history that the modern theatrical concept of the scene does not include the backdrop (even though the idea of a scene in colloquial usage retains the original sense of a background view). This space, while viewed, is positive. But what about when we “recall” or otherwise imagine it? Given its ethno-specific formations, can we say that what we construct within it “exists”? And if so, how?

Now Gans is hardly the first to use the term this way. Derrida, and Girard also deploy the “scene.” All three writers presuppose the concrete three-dimensionality of that humble “tent” at the rear of the stage. Of the three writers, only Gans is clear about what, in theoretical terms, he means by the term:

Why a scene rather than a theory? But the minimal anthropological “theory”—in Greek, an overview, a scenic perspective—is derived from a single scene. Because the birth of the human coincides with the birth of the scenic, it cannot be conceived as a series of non-scenic changes of state. (6)

Played out before the ancient Greek scene was the drama which, for Aristotle consisted of certain essential elements (in the case of tragedy, plot, character, diction, thought and so on), as well as in many cases, the three unities of place, time, and action. In the theatre of scenic thought, Gans also offers a minimal version of the scene: he identifies the essential constituents as eventness (6), a plural/public siting (18), an apodictically available hypothesizability (14), and of course, the three-dimensionality of a place, a world, such as we find on the Greek stage. In sum, about the scene as such, there is little dispute between the three writers. Motivating all three is the complex ethical demand of the contemporary critical situation we have (following Siebers) already outlined.

What *appears* to distinguish Derrida’s version of the scene is that for him, all scenes are either always already *inherited*, or if there are origins, we cannot know what they are. That is, a scene is always a site of inheritance traffic:

The origin is a speculation. Whence the “myth” and the hypothesis . . . all the methodological procedures amount to [*reviennent à*] hypotheses . . . Rushing to extract a fragment of it, to retain only its discursive content—a “hypothesis,” a

“theory,” a “myth,” all three at once, for such are his own words in the lines preceding the citations—completely preoccupied by the consideration of this fragment, which moreover he has punctured with ellipses after lifting it out of the body of the text, Freud seems barely attentive to what the *Symposium* puts on stage or hides from view in its theater. He is interested in this theater as barely as possible. (370-71)

12

But let us trace this more carefully. Derrida here is attacking an illustrative scene, an important adjunct to Freud’s intriguingly framed “speculations.” On stage Derrida insists, are characters Freud sees as irrelevant, but which disturb at least the picture he seeks to paint. For Derrida indeed, the speculation on a scene of origin that Freud seeks to proffer, is itself problematic, for it finds itself always, even in its exemplifications, in uncontrollable scenes of inheritance. Now it is certainly true that Freud is “interested in this theatre as barely as possible” (371). But *this is as it should be*, not just for the illustration to the speculation, but also for the speculations themselves. For as Derrida himself is well aware, this is a brilliant and suggestive excursion, projecting, hypothesizing, legating, inheriting, philosophizing. In this regard, the only criticism we would seek to venture of Freud’s approach is that there is at times a lack of clarity about the status of particular claims made, something that Derrida uses to undermine the entire edifice. But if the psychologico-philosophical scenes are not shown rigorously, they are, in our view, for the most part *proposed* in the hypothetico-speculative idiom appropriate to the emerging fields we envisage Gans as having opened.

But there is something else. These scenes are not originary in nature. They are secondary hypotheses. That is to say, they involve situations which are inherently palimpsestic in nature. Derrida appears to believe that the entire speculation is entirely negated by dint of mere expansion of the palimpsest. So while all three writers acknowledge apodictic dimensions to the scene, for Derrida, this is a negative claim: for him scenes are always so interpenetrative that any given scene of writing will always already be a scene of inheritance and, therefore, boundless. This allows him the liberty of disrupting the scene-work and hypothesizing Freud performs for the reader. He feels free to insert characters Freud has left out back onto the stage, to move the sets around, to change the lighting. And after he has done so, we see something else . . . Socrates, an image from Matthew Paris from medieval Europe, Edgar Allan Poe, a post office. *But these too are scenes*. We see all of them, we see them as insertions, as transformations, but we see them above all else, as counter-hypotheses with a positive force of their own. It is an intriguing twist of the Derridean pursuit of irreducibility, even if this is always so as to show a

scene of inheritance in a claimed scene of origin. And yet Freud does not posit an origin at this point. In this regard, Derrida's deployment of the scene of inheritance against the Freudian speculative-hypothetical scene leaves him strangely in the "same" scene.

For what Gans has shown is that hypotheses developed out of this variety of scene will inevitably exist in a plurality (we have ourselves seen the consequences in the discussions of anthropology above). But a mish-mash of plurality is not a scene. Rather, the scene is a product of the actively apodictically oriented subsequent analyst sketching the minimal requirements needed to give a hypothesis life. If Freud's "Pleasure Principle" essay were reframed as a Gansian scene (and it is already very close), it would be no objection at all to point to other figures in the palimpsest (and further resulting hypotheses). That is to miss the point entirely. Instead, what matters about Freud's essay is that *it still speaks to us*, despite Derrida's "refutation."

About the originary scene and the resulting originary hypothesis, we need add very little to what Gans himself has said. Obviously Derrida does not accept it as a possibility. Yet even in this regard, we observe Richard van Oort who in this journal has gone so far as to argue that

The unthematizable deconstructive aporia belongs most fundamentally to the origin of language, not in our contemporary discourse. The Derridean performative of *differance* must have been performed at the origin of humanity as the first historical moment. (1)

In our view, a scene of origin, proposed hypothetically, allows thought to take place. This is so in the case of the originary hypothesis which allows Gans his unprecedented anthropology of thought in general. But even if one does not accept this vista, it is also true in the less lofty sites of anthropology wherein we find new ways of speaking about the world, its prospects, its past, and its myriad of futures. Therein lies its promise.

As for the status of the hypothesis that results from this form of the scene, we can make a few observations. Its knowledge is provisional (such perhaps its violence). The scene-in-general for Gans, for Derrida, for Girard, comprises the event, a plurality, and a physical three-dimensionality. For Gans and Girard, it can be described minimally; for Derrida, it cannot.

Perhaps, though, it would be better to witness the hypothetical dimension that these scenes generate. In all these cases, the scenic is the hypothetical mode *par*

excellence, as strange as that may appear to those habituated to Derrida's easy usage of both the term "scene" and thereby what might best be called the *approach*. A scenic approach actually allows Derrida to counter-hypothesize while not appearing to do so. This because it forsakes poetics for dramaturgy. In Derrida's hands, it gives rise to the disruptive "extra character" or "prop." But it can also give witness to theory in a subjunctive mode. In the act of scenic imagining, "knowing" occurs outside the terrain of the declarative-positive or even contractually based if this, then that idiom of the conditional. In this respect, we agree with Victor Turner, who, following van Gennep, claims that performance necessarily invokes a register of communication *concerned with possibility and hypothesis*: the subjunctive operates with a logic of "'if it were so,' not 'it is so'" (Turner 83).

13

There will be those who see generative and fundamental anthropology as a nascent positivism. The kind of *ressentiment* provoked by figures such as Girard and Gans is well characterized by Thomas F. Bertonneau, who points out that positive knowledge appears as a conspiracy, "is tantamount to a plan for self-apotheosis" (Bertonneau 1996). To be sure, we can say that *things happen* (events), they happen in a dimension of inevitable eventness (*événementialité*), and this eventness only occurs because of the reflective and deferring quality of language. Yet, there is a crucial difference between the two "positive" knowledges being considered: where traditional positivism in its various forms assumes a conspicuously juridical function and is determined to set out in advance conditions for intelligibility (one thinks here of something like the Vienna Circle's criteria of meaningfulness) the positive knowledge of Gans and Girard operates through a process of scenic supersession. One does not outflank rival explanations primarily through refutation or accruing purported anomalies, but by producing the best interpretation. (It is interesting to note that neither Girard nor Gans have produced *a Language, Truth and Logic*—or an *Archaeology of Knowledge*, for that matter). But, epistemologically speaking, this is not an additivity in the sense of psychoanalysis, which, when faced with anomalies that its (originally) parsimonious model couldn't accommodate, simply added to its theoretical armature. This is a model of supersession that is always obliged to maximize its heuristic and hermeneutic plausibility in relation to its number and complexity of its presuppositions.

5. Machines for Crushing Butterflies

Many literature students will recall the brilliant and complex scholarly work of René Wellek, especially his *Theory of Literature*. It is one of those ironies of retrospect that the breadth and depth of scholarship in that work is rare in equivalent university primers in the human sciences today. When we consider how truly

marginal this variety of inquiry has become, it seems bizarre that a work like this one was so fiercely attacked. Given the relatively minor status of such theorists in the contemporary scene, the ire they provoke seems at the least a little overblown. We both laughed heartily when we encountered Virgil Nemoianu's remark about the way in which Wellek has been caricatured and reduced to a straw doll figure: "First, we are struck by the very oddness of the contentiousness. A relatively minor issue produces an enormously overblown reaction. A few eccentrics choose to play with form . . . and this causes harsh anger. Huge machineries are set up to smash harmless butterflies" (Nemoianu 42). So too have Girard and Gans been processed (the former more than the latter), despite the fact that their work exists as a series of serious questions about what passes as contemporary cultural theory.

In advocating for the new version of the hypothesis, one might imagine (and take stock of) the variety of contrivances invented to crush it. As was the case with Hayden White's often-cited critique of Girard, these contrivances often deploy, quite paradoxically, concretely positivist assumptions and operate at a higher level of generality than the kind of theory at which they take offense. Noting the fact that cultural empiricists often desert their cultural empiricism at the point of evaluating rival theories, Girard notes the fact that the worth of a hypothesis—in this case, his—should not be decided *a priori*: "I find it distressing that many people condemn it or even sometimes applaud it with no reference to the data, as if its merit or lack of merit depended on some intrinsic virtue" (Girard 39).

As we have suggested, generative anthropology not only attempts to situate the ethical in a hypothetical scene of human origin, but attempts to enact this ethical imperative through its own theoretical operations. It is perhaps no exaggeration to suggest that the greatest hazard of minimal thinking, in this sense, is its very attempt to furnish knowledge; it is perhaps an irony that the hypothetical mode itself, which is inherently vulnerable, is read as the displaced representative of dogmatism. The resentment provoked by a form of thinking that claims the center for itself, even only provisionally, is out of step with current poetics of thinking. As Gil Bailie notes, about the only "sweeping theory that has recently found favor is one that holds that sweeping theories are no longer possible" (*Violence Unveiled* 5). Bailie's statement is more than the expression of a simple *ressentiment*: it is an anthropological observation that suggests that the only way high levels of generality can now hold favor is through an explicit disavowal of what is implicitly endorsed; general claims cannot be directly confessed, despite their presence and persistence. Somehow this dis- or non-avowal presents itself to many as a kind of intellectual "freedom"; the very idea that cultural phenomena have foundations that are amenable to hypothetical specification is equated by the contemporary academy with "restriction."

Perhaps stranger still, the contemporary humanities find no problem in drawing extensively on several of the grand theoretical schemes of the nineteenth century; the presence of a certain theoretical postmodernism has in no way dimmed our appetites for the thinking of Freud and Marx and—when circumstance deems it appropriate—Darwin; if anything, it has increased them. One could well understand some of the attractions. A dessicated Engels or a scholastic Marx, for instance—like a New Age religion—makes few real political (or spiritual) demands on us. In this sense, contemporary postmodern Marxists have lost more than the rigid epistemological hierarchy of base-superstructure. Marx’s aim of creating a revolutionary consciousness is no longer necessarily tied to the capacity for actualizing it; indeed, the revolutionary consciousness *functions as a surrogate, a replacement, for the concrete social conditions which it originally attempted to actualize*. A certain kind of postmodern Marx gives us the opportunity to denounce “the bourgeois” while simultaneously neither demanding any concrete shift in social relations nor that the theorist be subservient to Marx as “master.” Quite the contrary: drawing on theorists like Marx and Freud offers us the opportunity to reiterate their schemes—or rather, themes—while minimizing our *ressentiment* towards them as theorists.

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But herein lies the bad faith of the maneuver. There are very good reasons, as we observed above, for the demise of Marxism, even in the nineteenth century. But if we admitted its merits: a generative anthropological approach to human culture, politics, and economics, a positive desire to explain and to transform oppression, then it must also be said that postmodern Marxism has none of these. It does not seek to change anything, and has in fact explained and changed nothing. Like so much of the other criticism that it criticizes, it legitimates not so much the transhistorical relevance of a hypothesis, but a generic license to condemn, often coterminous with a playing out of a certain chivalric fantasy of justice, as already noted. With the qualifier “strategic essentialism,” any grand theoretical matrix can be wheeled in the service of “praxis,” which will allow us our scapegoats while simultaneously relieving us of the burden of theorizing injustices with any kind of rigor whatsoever.

It may be objected that we are ourselves deploying that same variety of straw doll scapegoating of harmless enemies that characterizes everything else we have described. But this is precisely not what we are doing: for Marxism was the only significant generative anthropological analytic of the twentieth century. In observing its failure to metamorphose into a genuinely positive generative anthropology characterized by an open hypothetical system, we are commenting on academic tendencies far wider than these texts of the Marxist-Baroque-bronze

phase. We bear witness instead to a progression: after an initial burst of pre-Marxist “communist” political exchanges, the already vitriolic open system was closed down by Marx and Engels themselves via stratagems in the International and via a deluge of overblown “political economy” in the later works. But even at this stage, the claim of a positive and generative anthropology lived on. Only when the materials passed into the hands of the Marxists, from Lenin onwards, did positive science cloy into dogma. After its early and dramatic failure in the 1920s, the only real engines of Marxism were to be found in the West, where the thought took the form of increasingly prohibitionist protocols involving a dance of making reality appear to conform to a theory. One might well wonder at its extended bronze era. However, the tendency is not something localized (and Marxism was almost the only thing that looked like thought in the twentieth century). Instead, as we have already suggested, the prohibitionism itself has come to define thinking as such. Girard has remarked that

This complete skepticism, this nihilism with regard to knowledge is often put across just as dogmatically as the various dogmatisms that preceded it. Nowadays people disclaim any certain knowledge and any authority, but with a more assured and authoritarian tone than ever before. (*Things Hidden* 441-42)

The elaborate protocols for making statements of any non-condemnatory variety or even of any positive kind have made, as Girard puts it, for the sense that “We hope to find refuge in some sort of intellectual regionalism, and perhaps to give up thought altogether” (441). Certainly, however admirable the bronze-wrought delicacy of late Marxism, it serves no purpose other than its own formation. These kinds of theories no longer attempt to describe a world. Their function rather would appear to be to *compete* with it. Jamesonian Marxism, for instance, stages a mimetic operation whereby the de-centered complexity of postmodern culture, with its manifold exits and entrances, its disorienting whirl of shifting preoccupations and manifest depthlessness, is replicated in the theoretical operation itself. The Bonaventure Hotel captures not simply postmodern culture, but Jameson’s whole theoretical project and practice; the theoretical analysis-contrivance is *itself* just as resistant to comprehension as the objects of its theoretical gaze; here we have another Borges-like scenario: the map competes with the territory for complexity and our interest. And after all is said and done, we find what Borges’ “extract” already described:

Less Addicted to the Study of Geography, the Following Generations comprehended that this dilated Map was useless and, not without Impiety, delivered it to the inclemencies of the Sun and of the Winters. In the Western Deserts there remain

piecemeal Ruins of the Map, inhabited by Animals and Beggars. In the entire rest of the Country there is no vestige left of the Geographical Disciplines. (125)

This is not to say that Jameson operates with no level of generality; it is merely that when the overarching presuppositions and theses of his analysis are made manifest, it becomes difficult to distinguish generality from banality. And as for the resulting prohibitions on any form of speculative or positive knowledges, we believe it time to mark a departure of sorts. False theoretical modesty—the avoidance of hypothesis—minimizes our resentment towards a theorist; adopting the postmodernist flight from the center towards the periphery, opting for content over form, for semantics over syntax, might ultimately be at least aesthetically pleasing, but this is no ultimate justification for continuing with it. As Gans puts it, “Postmodernism is aware of form because it no longer believes in it” (*Signs* 211). But this, in our view, will no longer do.

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Now despite all this, there is no real necessity to side with “the systematizers” over “postmodernists.” For instance, Andrew McKenna has very ably pointed out the kinds of theoretical resonances that exist between many of the theoretical preoccupations of Girard and Derrida; McKenna works to repeatedly emphasize the thematic concerns that reverberate between the two without playing them off against each other. Girard, too, has not been blind to homologies between his own and Derrida’s work. In “Origins: A View from the Literature,” Girard makes some comparisons between his own interpretation of mythical texts and Derrida’s grammatology. He argues that the deconstructive critique of origins is not at all incompatible with his own theory of cultural formation. Girard himself shows striking parallels between his reading of myth and Derrida’s “logic of the supplement.” The emergence of the scapegoat is coterminous with their depiction as an outsider or visitor who threatens the community and so is killed or driven away. In light of this, Girard indicates the supplementary logic at work: “If the community is in a position to be visited by someone, at the beginning of these myths, it must already exist. And yet it must not exist since, after the stranger is expelled, he is perceived as the god or divine ancestor without whom the community would not be what it is, or even would not be at all” (“Origins” 28).⁽⁷⁾ In other words, although the community ostensibly precedes the scapegoat, ritual formation and the totemic system are attributable to them; the accidental emerges as an essential ground. This structure is also to be found in scapegoating in general: the outsider, the impure, marginal element, constitutes the mob’s internal cohesion, is central to it, in fact—it is the original “pillar of the community.”

The implication of Girard's thesis is that the logic of the supplement is a source of knowledge, *not its negation*. Girard argues that in deconstruction, in struggle with its idealistic forebears (primarily German idealism and phenomenology) the uncovering of the logic of the supplement must necessarily serve a negative, apodictic function; but in ethnology, the logic of the supplement is actually a key to comprehension: ". . . the same observation that looks like a curse to philosophy, seems like a blessing in mythology. In the rational context of philosophy, the supplement seems like disorder; in the irrational context of myth, it looks like a potential source of order" ("Origins" 30). It is not simply logical inconsistency that interests Girard, but the consistency of that inconsistency; inconsistencies are patterned. It would be a mistake, then, to miss the opportunity for this logic to furnish positive knowledge; to ignore this would be to remain subject to the production of a new universal scheme that is "still the child of rationalism in the sense that it contradicts its conception of reason only in the manner that this reason expects to be contradicted" ("Origins" 32).

Thus, for Girard (and Gans as well), the determination of "undecidability" in a text, the recognition that philosophy is *polemos*, even that it is in certain respects continuous with mythology, are not insights complete in themselves; they are starting points. To the contemporary mind, the idea that mythology has paradoxical and internally incoherent elements is banal; why should we remain satisfied with a comparable insight into certain kinds of theoretical discourse? In this sense, Derrida is right to critique the principle of identity always at work in Lévi-Strauss that renders all contradictions mute by assimilating them to a principle of identity—a theoretical operation that transposes all mythical systems as transparent modes of rational thought—but perhaps he errs equally in his insistence on the seeming singularity of these contradictions. The supplement isn't simply the undoing of a text, but a hermeneutic key to seeing its systematic distortions.

So is it really the case that the preoccupations or even the provisional "conclusions" of Girard and Gans are not shared by other scholars in the Humanities, or is the real point of contention the fact that they present *conclusions at all*? As we have suggested, one of the chief virtues of Gansian "minimal thinking" is its ability to think the connections between epistemological rigor and communicative ethics, between parsimonious explanation and parsimonious communication, and then enact that reflection through its own critical practices. But this style of theory is, quite literally, on the margins in the contemporary academy.

Both Girard and Gans challenge through their theories the current mode of "scientific impartiality" favored in the Humanities: the refusal to hypothesize at all. The preponderance of academic conferences should not obscure from us the fact that the dominant ethical imperative of much contemporary scholarship is not one

of *reciprocity* but of *privacy*; the logic seems to go: if no substantive hypothesis or concrete problematic of cultural formation is entertained, then there is no danger of this being imposed on others; in the absence of such a concrete problematic, there is (seemingly) nothing to impose. Hayden White's critique of Girard reveals concerns about a theoretical project simultaneously too speculative *and* reductive. How else are we to make sense of the author of *Metahistory* and *Tropics of Discourse* enlisting a positivist criterion of meaning (falsification) in order to judge the worth of Girard's project?

Resentment needs, in our view, to give way to sympathetic inquiry; and we have to be aware of the possibility that knowledge itself can become a kind of victim, subject to expulsion during times of cultural upheaval. Knowledge then becomes either one of the symptoms of a crisis or a casualty—a scapegoat or a “quasi-victim”—of the convulsions of social decay (*Scapegoat* 100). Such then is our challenge. We commend it to you.

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Notes

1. By "vulnerability," we are referring to an epistemological openness, not a weakness-as-drawback, intrinsic to the theory. ([back](#))

2. Cultures are not “blind and purposeless”; they possess proximate teleologies (or at least constituent elements of them do)—they do things for reasons—and they possess properly normative elements. Inversely, the development of an ethics or a morality cannot be attributed to the “ends” of survival and reproduction, as there is, strictly (naturalistically) speaking, no “end” to which evolution “aims.” It makes little sense to talk of “random variations” in a culture analogous in any significant way to genetic drift. [\(back\)](#)

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3. This historical claim—that Rome “lacked competition on its own level”—is in the very least, highly contentious. [\(back\)](#)

4. This approach originates in Girard’s work and assumes that “realism” should not be the result of an *a priori* philosophical commitment that a research program needs to assume in order that its “findings” be realized. The “reality” of the phenomena that Girard documents, rather, is required for the adequate interpretation of data; it is *a posteriori* insofar as referentiality is a *finding of the research, rather than a (philosophical) assumption* (*The Scapegoat* 1-99). Girard’s approach brackets (in the phenomenological sense) not simply “realism” but “antirealism” for the purposes of reading texts. No one can know whether referentiality—or indeed, broad theoretical synthesis itself—is possible until this operation has been completed. [\(back\)](#)

5. One should not conflate Gans’s and Derrida’s views of this relationship. Where, for Derrida, violence inheres in representation itself, for Gans, representation functions to defer violence. [\(back\)](#)

6. Cf. Chris Fleming’s essay on the possibility in relation to madness. [\(back\)](#)

7. The example Girard draws on for this example is the myth of Tikarau, a visitor to the land of Tikopia, who though welcomed at first, is then perceived as a cheat and thief who must be driven away. Tikarau is the “dangerous supplement”: although the community supposedly precedes him, he is the principal figure in the totemic system; the cultural system as such is attributed to him; the paradoxical element in this suggests that the supplement is originary. The “original origin” isn’t sufficient to ground the system, and the unnecessary becomes its necessary ground (“Origins” 29). [\(back\)](#)